


11-2022

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### Recommended Citation

Druey, Cécile (2022) "Divided Memories About Building Peace in Chechnya (1995-2004)," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 12, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.12.1.1194>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol12/iss1/5>

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# Article

## **Divided Memories About Building Peace in Chechnya (1995–2004)**

Cécile Druey\*

*The conflicts in and around Chechnya are intractable, with a perceived impossibility to find a negotiated solution. This paper focuses on the hostage crises of Budennovsk (1995) and Beslan (2004) which are episodes from the two Chechnya Wars and had an important impact on their further course. Based on the memories of key actors representing specific sides of the conflict, the paper identifies and contextualizes diverging approaches to negotiations and conflict settlement. Conceptual support for this analysis of open-source materials is provided by the theoretical literature on “ripeness” and “readiness” as conditions for the initiation and successful conduction of negotiations. The paper finds that it is not only the divisions between the different sides of the conflict that affected the chances of negotiated peace, but those within the Russian and Chechen constitutions themselves.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Chechnya, today an Autonomous Republic in the mountainous South of the Russian Federation with a population of just under one and a half million, looks back on several centuries of conflictual relations with the central government in Moscow. During Perestroika and after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, part of the Chechen population (again) dedicated itself to the struggle for self-determination and independence, after which Moscow launched a full-fledged military invasion of the Republic in November 1994. The ensuing armed conflict, officially referred to as the

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“Operation to Restore Constitutional Order” (President of the Russian Federation 1994), but widely called the First Chechnya War, lasted several months, ending in August 1996 with the recapture of the capital Grozny by the Chechen combatants and the conclusion of the agreement of Khasavyurt. However, the following period of relative peace did not last long. In the autumn of 1999, the Russian army launched its second armed “operation,” this time in the name of “counterterrorism” (President of the Russian Federation 1999), commonly also referred to as the Second Chechnya War. Although Moscow declared the end of the operation in 2009, the Second War has never been officially concluded and no agreement was signed. For certain groups, it is therefore considered unresolved and still ongoing.

Spanning a long period of time, involving several actors and affecting several social strata, the conflict between Chechnya and Russia can be defined as a “protracted” (Azar 1990) or “intractable conflict” (Bar-Tal, Halperin, and Pliskin 2015; Kriesberg 1993; 2010), which makes it especially difficult to resolve peacefully. Moreover, in intractable conflicts, negotiation-oriented “doves” face a hard time, and “hawks” who want to continue or solve the conflict by coercive and unilateral means dominate the scene on both sides. “Doves” and “hawks” exist on both sides, the Russian and the Chechen. Based on the memories of various actors involved, this article analyses the trial of strength between “doves” and “hawks” and their different approaches to conflict management. Using two key moments from the First and Second Chechen Wars as examples, namely the hostage-takings in Budennovsk (1995) and Beslan (2004), the paper asks why in certain contexts an approach of negotiated peace prevails, whilst in others it does not.

The theories of conflict “ripeness” (I. W. Zartman 2001, 2015), as well as of the “readiness” and “willingness” of actors to get involved in negotiations (Kleiboer 1994; Pruitt 2015) are helpful to structure the analysis. Notably, they help to conceptually link outcomes, people (individuals or groups) and contexts, and they enable an understanding of the dominance of either a “doves” or “hawks” concept for peacebuilding during certain periods of time.

Using an interdisciplinary approach, this article contributes to various fields of research. It provides a critical assessment of the narratives of mnemonic key actors involved in the conflict in Chechnya and links them to the larger context of conflict and conflict resolution. This actors—and context-based approach builds a conceptual bridge between memory studies and conflict context-based approach builds a conceptual bridge between memory studies and conflict—and peace studies, as well as area studies for the former Soviet space. The study is therefore equally interesting for historians, social psychologists, political scientists, and specialists in international relations.

## METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The article is based on data collected from two case studies, which are the hostage-takings of Budennovsk (1995) and Beslan (2004). Now, one might ask why focus only on hostage-takings and not on other episodes from the conflict? Hostage-takings and other forms of indiscriminate violence against civilians are typical instruments of irregular warfare, used when fighting with equal means is impossible or disadvantageous, and one side relies on it to gain a strategic advantage. According to Stathis Kalyvas, such high-risk terrorist actions are an attempt by one side to show the “rival actor’s inability to establish full control over large areas of the country”(Kalyvas 2006: 138). Hostage-takings and other terrorist activities can therefore become key moments in a war because—until control is restored, or it is at least successfully portrayed as such—they can fundamentally alter the balance of power, either in favour of the insurgents or in favour of the state. Depending on the outcome, this can result in a context which is supportive or dismissive of negotiations.

The comparison of the examples of Budennovsk (1995) and Beslan (2004) is interesting, because the two hostage-takings show many external similarities, but resulted in very different outcomes: in both cases, the Chechen combatants acted under the leadership of the field commander Shamil Basayev and targeted civilian institutions in Russian or pro-Russian territories of the North Caucasus, but outside the immediate zone of conflict. However, if “Budennovsk” opened the door for negotiations between the conflict parties, with “Beslan” this window was definitively closed.

As an empirical base for the analysis, the article uses open-source materials associated with the different sides of the conflict and presenting their specific mnemonic narratives about what happened in 1995 and in 2004 respectively. In the article memories are used as empirical data, instead of other primary materials such as newspapers, political statements, or data from private archives. This is because the primary aim of the paper is not to recount what happened in the past, but to reconstruct and compare the diverging perspectives of the involved sides." Memories are a significant methodological tool in conflict and peace research. They link a (real or imagined) past to the present, helping mnemonic actors to frame their political and military deeds of the present and the past in a certain way. According to scholars who specialize in the study of memory and conflict, mnemonic narratives can act in a way that supports both conflict and peace (Bar-Tal, Oren, and Nets-Zehngut 2014; Bar-Tal 2013; Volkan 2001; Cobb 2013). Analyzing them is therefore particularly important in order to understand conflicts in more depth and to find appropriate entry-points for peacebuilding. The study of mnemonic narratives also allows for a better understanding of the dividing lines and the underlying causes of conflict. (Cobb 2013) This is especially important for the analysis of intractable conflicts, which span over a long period of time and affect all layers of society. These types of conflict are especially difficult to resolve and can easily result in a (re-)escalation. In the case of Chechnya, this “intractability” becomes evident in the interplay of “doves” and “hawks,” and in the

powerlessness of the former vis-à-vis the latter in the context of the increasing militarization of political discourse under Vladimir Putin.

### TERMS IN USE

At this point, a few terms should be clarified that are important for the paper's further analysis.

#### **Conflict management and conflict resolution**

Armed conflicts involve various actors and political levels, and there are many different strategies about how peace can, or should, be restored. "Conflict management" is understood here as a concept based mainly on the maintenance or restoration of military stability and focusses on a short-term management of violence, while it leaves the political and psycho-social dimension of the conflict largely unaddressed (or "frozen"). Conflict management also includes the possibility of using a "carrot and stick" method to put pressure on the conflict parties. (W. Zartman and Touval 1985: 263; Richmond 2005: 89–96; Paffenholz 2010: 51) The "management" of violence should not be confused with "conflict resolution." The latter intends to be a fully-fledged "transformation of the relationship between the parties" (Kelman 2010, 2) and addresses the settlement of the conflict in a broader perspective, including the negotiation of a political solution (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall 2016; Darby and Mac Ginty 2003) and overcoming the psycho-social consequences of the conflict (Lederach 1997; Bar-Tal 2013; Kelman 2010).

#### **'Hawks' and 'doves'**

In this article, the term 'hawks' is used to describe individuals who generally rely on the use of unilateral and often forceful means as a primary approach to deal with conflicts. This means that an insurgency, such as the one that erupted in Chechnya, is perceived to be overcome only by the total annihilation of the adversary or by its expulsion from the contested territory. Beyond its military significance, the term also includes "ideological hawks," whose actions and thinking are defined by a higher political goal. In their understanding, the use of force is reasonable not only as a pragmatic means to reach a military goal, but also due to a higher logic of some "holy war." In the language of Max Abrahms, "ideological hawks" thus pursue maximalist "outcome goals" (Abrahms 2012: 367), intending to fundamentally change the existing political order and to impose their own ideology on the adversary (Abrahms 2012).

"Doves" are defined in the classical literature as co-operators, whereas they usually develop a peacebuilding impact only if they meet an equally cooperative counterpart, or act as pairs (Pilisuk, Potter, and Winter 1965). As this article understands the term, 'doves' use negotiations as a means to solve problems of armed violence, including acts of terrorism, with a focus on saving human lives.

Furthermore, the focus of “doves” is not only on a purely military pacification of the conflict, but aimed at a larger and more sustainable conflict resolution, including political settlement (Hansen, Ramsbotham, and Woodhouse 2004).

### **THE BUDENNOVSK HOSTAGE CRISIS (1995)**

On 14 June 1995, a group of between 150 to 180 Chechen combatants under the leadership of field commander Shamil Basayev entered the town of Budennovsk in Southern Russia, took between 1500 and 2000 hostages, including civilians, local security forces, local authorities, hospital patients and medical personnel, and occupied the Budennovsk hospital and adjacent buildings. Basayev issued an ultimatum to the Russian government, that the Russian army, which had been waging its armed “Operation to restore constitutional order” (President of the Russian Federation 1994) in Chechnya for six months, should stop hostilities and withdraw its troops immediately.<sup>1</sup> President Yeltsin, who was abroad at that moment, did not react to this demand. Instead, on the orders of key decision-makers responsible for security policy, elite troops of the Ministry of the Interior, the so-called *Alpha* and *Vega* groups, were deployed to Budennovsk in order to deal with the terrorists. Early in the morning on 17 June 1995, they started storming the hospital, with the result that several dozen hostages who were taken as living shields by their captors died from Russian bullets, and hundreds were injured. In parallel to the storming of the hospital, different Russian actors had begun negotiations with the hostage takers. The delegation which was finally successful in brokering a compromise was made up of State Duma parliamentarians and human rights activists, under the lead of the former Ombudsman for Human Rights, Sergey Kovalev. The result of the Budennovsk hostage crisis, according to reports shared in 2020, was the death of 129 hostages and local police, three Alpha fighters and about 15 Chechen combatants. Numerous people were wounded on both sides and there was major damage to the local infrastructure (Kotlyar, Kazakova, and Korzakov 2020; Charny 2020; Kolosova, Gritsenko, and Bondarenko 2020).

Based on the accounts of different groups of actors, who recalled memories of the events from various perspectives, this subchapter reconstructs the controversial discussions about the context and the significance of the Budennovsk hostage crisis and its resolution. The article focuses on the narratives of three mnemonic actors who were involved in the Budennovsk hostage crisis in 1995. Each of these narratives emerged and was cultivated in a specific political context and, as such, serves certain political aims: whereas the Russian authorities’ account of “Budennovsk” emphasizes its significance for counter-insurgency and the fight against terrorism, the Chechen diaspora and former combatants present the hostage-taking against the backdrop of the Russian war against Chechnya and the consolidation of Chechen statehood and independence; Russian human rights activists, on the other hand, who mediated a compromise between the Russian leadership and the

Chechen fighters in 1995, focus on the successful mediation effort and on the failings of the Russian government.

### **OFFICIAL RUSSIA AND THE NARRATIVE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM**

Mnemonic actors close to the Russian government today describe the Budennovsk hostage-taking as the first large-scale manifestation of a terrorist Chechen underground, which would commit many more similar misdeeds throughout Russia in the years to come. The image of the hostage-takers involved, who were, and still are, dismissed in the Russian media as the “scum of society” and “criminals,” is correspondingly negative (Rossiya 1 2020). The military, socio-cultural and legal arguments, as they are presented in today’s official discourse, place “Budennovsk” in the narrative framework of a global campaign against terrorism which has, however, specifically Russian features. Like a powerful ideology, this “War on Terror” *à la russe*, has increasingly dominated the official Russian discourse since the turn of the millennium, originating in the Kremlin’s second military campaign and the ensuing “mop-up” operations in Chechnya since 1999, and receiving new impetus and international acceptance after the 9/11 attacks and the declaration of the “Global War on Terror.”

This domestic Russian “War on Terror” took place mainly at a political level and is first and foremost a discursive construction, where “Budennovsk” and the way the crisis is remembered plays an important role. The constructed nature of the government’s mnemonic narrative today is underlined by the fact that the terms “terrorism” and “terrorists” were still largely absent from public debates in Russia in 1995. The Russian media of that time would rather talk of “fighters” (Topol 1995) and “gunmen” (RFE/RL 1995).

### **“BUDENNOVSK” AND THE CLAIM FOR CHECHEN SOVEREIGNTY**

In the memories of the Chechen diaspora, which mostly speaks out in favour of the vision of self-determination embodied in the de-facto independent “Republic of Chechnya-Ichkeriya” of the 1990s, supports the perspective of the former combatants implementing the hostage-taking. Their memories present “Budennovsk” as an element of successful state-building and underline the importance of the political negotiation process that began after the hostage-taking in summer 1995. During these negotiations, the Chechen de-facto authorities, under the leadership of President Djokhar Dudayev, were directly represented at the table for the first time and held face-to-face talks with their Russian counterpart. Moreover, the fact that the Russian Prime-Minister Victor Chernomyrdin was temporarily involved in the resolution of the hostage-crisis is seen as a kind of recognition of Chechen statehood (Vatchagaev 2019, Akhmadov and Lansky 2010). State-building in this context also means nation-building, with Shamil Basayev remembered as a fierce defender of the interests of his compatriots. In the (albeit somewhat romanticizing) memory of *Duma* deputy Yuliy Rybakov,

Basayev acted as a kind of “Caucasian Robin Hood,” and his attack on Budennovsk first and foremost served the consolidation of the Chechens as a newly independent community:

*Immediately after entering the village [and releasing the voluntary hostages in 1995r – C.D.], Basayev lined up his fighters, took off his hat and told us: 'I did what I did to you, and I acted like a dog. That's how it happened... But I had no other option, I had to save my people!' Then he turned around and, together with his unit, disappeared into the woods....(www.warchechnya.ru 2018)*

### **THE KOVALEV-GROUP: A VICTIMS-ORIENTED PERSPECTIVE**

The Russian liberal parliamentarians and human rights activists under the lead of the former Ombudsman for Human Rights Sergey Kovalev acted as mediators between combatants and the Russian authorities. They arrived in Budennovsk on the evening of 16 June 1995. As they reported in 2020, their initial aim was to support the staff headquarters of the Russian armed forces in their attempt to negotiate a solution without bloodshed among civilians. However, they found that the staff headquarters perceived their intention to mediate and their mere presence as an open threat (Nemzer 2020).

Beyond their concern for the fate of the hostages, Kovalev and his group also showed a certain understanding for the other side, and a will to find a mutually satisfying solution for the Chechen attackers and their claims. Massacres and other forms of indiscriminate violence committed by the Russian armed forces during the first months of the war had resulted in humanitarian hardship and a feeling of injustice and discrimination for large parts of the Chechen population (Blinushov 1996; Gilligan 2009; Kavkazskiy Uzel 2019). From this perspective, it was therefore only logical that the Chechens retaliated with equally cruel means, including the use of indiscriminate violence against civilians. To stop the spiral of radicalization, there was an urgent need for negotiations to bring the needs and interests of all groups involved to the table. This approach stands in strong contrast to the traditional violence-and casualty-intensive approach to conflict management of the Russian (and Soviet) security sector. The focus on negotiation and compromise also explains why the mediators were attacked from all sides.

### **THE HOSTAGE-TAKING OF BESLAN (2004)**

In Beslan, a small town in the North Caucasus located in the Autonomous Republic of North Ossetia, where the majority of the population is Orthodox Christian, a squad of combatants mainly from the neighbouring republics of Chechnya and Ingushetia stormed the building of the “School No. 1” on the morning of 1 September 2004. In addition to the pupils (aged between seven and eighteen years



old) and teachers, many parents were also gathered there at that time to celebrate the start of the school year. The attackers were heavily armed and took more than 1000 pupils, teachers, and parents as hostages. Local police, army and intelligence forces (OMON) were quick to surround the school and were later joined by the special forces *Alfa* and *Vypel*. The Russian government initially announced that it would not use force in order to protect the lives of the hostages, who were mostly children, and would negotiate in order to avoid bloodshed. However, except for one meeting with the hostage-takers by the former President of Ingushetia (Ruslan Aushev), no negotiations took place. During the following storming of the school buildings, the roof of the gym hall collapsed and buried many people underneath it. According to official figures, 331 persons, more than one quarter of the hostages, lost their lives. Over half of the victims were children (Griess 2019).

Memories of the events in Beslan are not only controversial, but also often very emotional and traumatic. In addition to several media reports, there are also a number of film and audio documents produced that try to analyze and cope with the experience in very different ways. There is also a lively culture of remembrance among the civilian population in Beslan and other Russian cities, where commemorative events are regularly held in honour of the victims. However, the following sections of this paper look at the hostage-taking not from a perspective of the most frequently quoted mnemonic actors, which are the former hostages and victims' representatives. Rather, in order to maintain an analytical focus on negotiation, the chapter will concentrate on the accounts of the conflicting parties, namely the official Russian authorities and the former combatants and de-facto authorities of Chechnya.

#### **“BESLAN” IN THE ACCOUNTS OF OFFICIAL RUSSIA**

Official sources close to the Russian authorities present the hostage-takers as exclusively responsible for the high numbers of casualties. According to the state-owned news agency “RIA Novosti,” the combatants shot hostages randomly and used indiscriminate violence against civilian hostages, including children (RIA Novosti 2008; 2014; 2020). The commemorative articles underline the responsibility of the Russian state and the whole nation, not only of individual groups, to cherish the memory of “Beslan.” At first glance, this sounds like a recognition of the claims of the victims, but it also means that the state determines how this memory of victimhood is to be shaped. In the state’s interpretation, the memory of the hostage crisis itself is often overshadowed by the image of a successful “fight against terrorism” by the Russian government. In 2005, in honor of the events in Beslan, the Third of September was declared a “day of solidarity in the fight against terrorism.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, in parallel to the narrative of the civilian victims, the Russian state has actively constructed a parallel memory of “Beslan” which glorifies the special forces as having defeated the terrorists; it poses them as rescuers with children in their arms (RIA Novosti 2020; 2014; 2008).<sup>3</sup>

The Russian authorities, especially the intelligence services responsible for handling “Beslan,” were repeatedly criticized by independent media and victims’ organizations; firstly, for the deliberate spread of false information in state media in order to present the actions of the security forces in the most favourable light possible, secondly, for the total refusal to negotiate, and thirdly, for the disproportionate use of heavy weapons. Hence, the *siloviki* (“power men,” security forces) were accused of intending primarily to destroy the terrorists, not to rescue the hostages. Reacting to this criticism, the official discourse post-hoc frames the “no negotiation” approach of the security forces in 2004 as the only legally possible option, with potential negotiations with the hostage-takers being strictly forbidden by the recently revised anti-terror legislation (RIA Novosti 2020). Another feature of the official narrative on “Beslan” is the clear attribution of blame, which avoids going into detail about the origin and demands of the hostage-takers. In “RIA Novosti’s” account, the main perpetrators of the hostage-taking include the field commander Shamil Basayev and Aslan Maskhadov, then president of the de-facto independent Chechnya-Ichkeriya Republic, triumphantly adding that by today, they were all “annihilated” (RIA Novosti 2008) or “liquidated” (RIA Novosti 2020). In particular, the mention that Maskhadov was involved aimed to discredit the de-facto government in Grozny and the Chechen independence movement as a whole; Maskhadov himself and other high-ranking representatives of the Ichkerian government virulently denied any role in the hostage taking (Akhmadov and Lanskoj 2010).

### THE CHECHEN INSURGENTS: DIVIDED OPINIONS

When analyzing the “Beslan” memory of former combatants and state representatives from Chechnya, it is difficult to rely upon the direct memories of eye-witnesses, as these have been largely eradicated from public debates due to death or imprisonment. However, a number of indirect sources, such as reposts of interviews and analytical materials published in social media close to the Chechen movement of independence, or memoirs published by former authorities in Grozny who are not in the diaspora, enable the perspectives of the insurgents to be reconstructed.

There is no one Chechen account of “Beslan.” Rather, it is divided into at least two sets of voices; more radical voices, which place the terrorist attack in the tradition of an Islamist and all-Caucasian insurgency calling for a *djihad* (“Holy War”) against the *kafirs* (“infidels”), and more moderate voices, which judge it from the nationalist perspective of the de facto authorities in Grozny. The Islamist narrative was supported by a repost of an undated interview with the field commander Shamil Basayev by the Chechen diaspora internet platform “Kavkazcenter”(Kavkazcenter 2021).<sup>4</sup> In the interview Basayev states the aims of the hostage-taking in Beslan, which were stopping the Russian-led “genocide” in Chechnya, including a full withdrawal of troops and opening peace talks between Chechnya and Russia. Furthermore, he compares “Beslan” and “Budennovsk”: according to

him, the aims and methods of both sides basically remained the same. However, what had changed was the context—which also explains why the insurgents’ “success” of 1995 could not be repeated in 2004. In Putin’s Russia, an independent press that could disseminate the claims of the insurgents and influence public opinion and political decision making no longer existed; furthermore, Basayev says that the *FSB* (“Federal’naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti,” intelligence services) were now the only actor in charge on the Russian side, opting for a solution by force and aborting all attempts of official and private mediators to initiate negotiations with the hostage-takers. Finally, Basayev takes full responsibility for what happened in Beslan; he expresses his deep concern that children were killed. However, in his opinion it is Russia, and only Russia, who should be blamed for the bloodshed (Kavkazcenter 2021; 2004). It is not only the content of Basayev’s speech which is interesting, but also the symbolic setting in which it was taken. During his speech, Basayev sits in front of a flag which displays the Arabic lettering *Allahu akbar!* (“Allah is great!”). This demonstrates an affiliation of the Chechen independence movement (or at least of Basayev as one of its prominent leaders) with the international Islamist community, which in 1995 was not openly displayed. Furthermore, during the broadcast Basayev wears a protective vest with the inscription *antiterror*. This reverses the Russian narrative of “counterterrorism” in an almost ironical way, accusing the Russian adversaries and their local vassals, rather than Caucasian independence fighters, of terrorism, and justifying the use of force as a legitimate countermeasure (Kavkazcenter 2021).

In contrast to Basayev, the authorities in Grozny clearly condemned the hostage-taking. Ilyas Akhmadov, advisor to Presidents Dudayev and Maskhadov, friend of Basayev and himself Minister of Foreign Affairs of Chechnya-Ichkeriya from 1999 to 2002, wrote in his memoirs that “Beslan” morally “stands completely outside all coordinates,” (Akhmadov and Lanskoj 2010: 223) and that after the hostage-taking “the Chechen cause lost all its supporters overnight” (Akhmadov and Lanskoj 2010: 227). He understood it as an aberration of the extremist wing of the Chechen insurgency, an attempt to “repeat Budennovsk,” where Chechen “radicals came up with the formula of using terrorism to force the beginning of talks” (Akhmadov and Lanskoj 2010: 174). Whereas this approach might have been partially successful in 1995, it greatly harmed the Chechen government in the 2000s, which was in a much weaker position by that time. According to Akhmadov, this was especially detrimental for President Maskhadov who tried hard to “exert control and assert himself as a credible interlocutor” (Akhmadov and Lanskoj 2010: 187).

Unexpected support for the posthumous restoration of Maskhadov's credibility comes from former Kremlin dignitaries. Andrey Illarionov, Russian economist and personal representative of Vladimir Putin to the G8 until 2005, remembers in an interview with Radio Svoboda that during the hostage-taking, he tried jointly with the Chechen president to persuade Vladimir Putin to allow Maskhadov to negotiate with the hostage-takers in order to save the children. However, according to

Illarionov, Putin denied safe passage to Maskhadov several times, and when the latter said he would go to Beslan anyway, the Russian forces started to storm the school buildings (Velekhov 2016).

### THE CONTEXT: FROM 1995 TO 2004

The following section aims to better understand the processes and events that contributed to, or resulted from, “Budennovsk” and “Beslan,” contextualizing the two hostage crises at local, regional and international levels. This should further allow conclusions to be drawn in terms of the “ripeness” of the situation and the disposition of the key actors speaking for or against a negotiated settlement.

At a local level, the Chechen independence movement reached new heights in 1995, with a successful mobilization of combatants as a result of grievances and in-war radicalization. Despite the resistance of hardliners, who were aiming for a purely military victory against Russia, the Chechen de-facto government was actively engaged in a process of political statebuilding, which was reflected in its support for negotiations on Chechnya’s future status. By 2004, the balance of power between radicals and moderates had changed. As is also reflected in the mnemonic narratives on “Beslan,” the Russian counter-insurgency and massive use of indiscriminate violence during the Second Chechnya War severely tested the Chechens' will to resist; the loss of life and destruction were enormous, and the population was increasingly tired of the war. Furthermore, the Chechen independence movement was more and more split between the radical Islamists, who wanted a *djihad* or “total war” against Russia and admitted also terrorist means of conflict, and the more moderated nationalists or “Ichkerians,” who fought for political independence. The gradual prevailing of the former and marginalization of the latter resulted in an ideological shift from nationalism to Islamism, which happened as a result of the radicalization and internal fragmentation of the Chechen society during the Second War, and also due to Russian military repression and the “de-capitation” of the insurgency. (Ratelle 2021) “Beslan” thus signified the end of the Chechen movement of independence, as a result of Russian counter-insurgency and the Islamization and regionalization<sup>5</sup> of the conflict (Akhmadov and Lansky 2010; Vatchagaev 2021).

At a national level, the hostage-taking of Budennovsk (1995) took place amidst the domestic turmoil of the First Chechnya War (1994–1996). Military failures and high casualties among the mostly very young soldiers during the first months of the war exposed organizational and personnel shortcomings in the Russian army and led to increased discontent among the population (Specter 1997). These structural deficiencies were also one of the reasons why Moscow suffered a military defeat in August 1996, with the recapture of Grozny by the Chechens. Furthermore, the Yeltsin government was still politically weakened after the constitutional crisis of 1993 and often criticized, notably by its parliamentarians. Yeltsin was also in the vulnerable position of a soon to be re-elected presidential candidate and could not afford to turn the electorate against him. The political

environment of the mid-1990s in Russia was relatively pluralist and democratic, meaning that civil society and independent media were able to exert at least some control over the government and the security sector. By 2004, the situation had completely changed. Although during “Beslan” the Second Chechen War was still ongoing, this war was much less present in Russian society. Amongst other factors, this was a result of the increasing “securitization”<sup>6</sup> of the insurgency in the North Caucasus, which was now being handled as a “matter in chief” of the president and his close associates. Seminal for Russia’s political and military development after “Beslan” was President Putin’s speech of 4<sup>th</sup> September 2004. In it, Putin announced drastic measures, including the consolidation and centralization of state power, the declaration of the North Caucasus as a zone in need of special attention and control, and the valorization of the security apparatus as the main organization responsible for dealing with the threat of “international terror,” which, according to him, was leading a “total, cruel and full-scale war” against Russia (President of the Russian Federation 2004). In this context, in the Kremlin’s official narrative “Beslan” became the justification to launch a new and even more vigorous effort to definitively crush the power of the independent Chechen government under Aslan Maskhadov, and to consolidate the position of the new government loyal to the Kremlin under the Kadyrov clan, which had implemented Moscow’s “counter-terrorist” campaign in the North Caucasus in an even more vigorous and authoritarian way (Dannreuther and March 2008; Lyall 2010; Russell 2014).<sup>7</sup>

At an international level, too, the Russian government’s approaches to conflict management in the North Caucasus was an issue of debate. In the 1990s, there was an active interest and support amongst Russian and international civil society for the Chechen claims of self-determination and independence, and the Russian attempts to solve the disputes purely by force were strongly criticized. At the same time, state-sponsored criticism of Russia’s transgressions in the Caucasus was more cautious, as Western governments feared that an overly harsh condemnation of Yeltsin and his government would jeopardize the precarious transformation process Russia was at that time undergoing. In 2004, the geo-political considerations of Western states and international organizations clearly outweighed the outraged reactions of civil society and the international human rights community. At Russia’s request, a special session of the UN Security Council was held on the evening of 1 September 2004, on the first day of the hostage-taking, after which U.S. President George W. Bush offered Russia support (UN Security Council 2004). In other words, “Beslan” further cemented the international alliance against the “War on Terror,” in turn giving the Kremlin free rein over how it suppressed protests which qualified as “terror” in Russia.

**“DOVES” AND “HAWKS” IN PEACEMAKING: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ACTORS’  
AVAILABILITY AND WILLINGNESS**

An important factor determining the right moment or the “ripeness” for negotiations is the availability, willingness and ability of the involved actors—which, in turn, also depend on the situations within the negotiating actors’ constituencies (Pruitt 2015; Kleiboer 1994). These internal conditions and their impact on the course of the war and the attitudes toward conflict management are the focus of this chapter.

The two wars in Chechnya, against the backdrop of which the hostage-takings in Budennovsk and Beslan took place, were not merely (inter-ethnic) conflicts between Moscow and Grozny, or between Russians and Chechens, but they also exposed significant rifts within these groups. On either side there is a trial of strength between “hawks,” who rely on the unilateral use of force and the annihilation of the enemy as a primary means of conflict management, and “doves,” who favour political negotiations and a focus on “saving human lives” as a way to reach peace.

In order to develop a peacebuilding impact, “doves” have to meet an equally cooperative counterpart on the other side of the conflict, which allows them to act in pairs; this is what we know from the classical literature on peacebuilding. (Pilisuk, Potter, and Winter 1965) “Budennovsk” represents an important turning point in the course of the war, as it opened up opportunities for the “doves” on both sides to act.

Key people on the Russian side who made the opening of negotiations possible were Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin (Akhmadov and Lanskoj 2010; Nemzer 2020), and the human rights activists under the leadership of Sergey Kovalev, who acted as mediators and brokered a compromise with the hostage-takers. Furthermore, in the aftermath of “Budennovsk,” General Aleksandr Lebed played a crucial role for the successful completion of the negotiations, including signing the ceasefire and demilitarization agreement of Khasavyurt (August 1996).

On the Chechen side, the “doves” pushing for a negotiated, political resolution were in a difficult situation in June 1995, as the Chechen combatants were about to succumb to Russia’s overwhelming military force. However, Basayev and his “hawkish” and violent methods used in Budennovsk created a new momentum for these Chechen “doves.” The peace negotiations that started in July 1995 signified at least a partial recognition of the de-facto government of Chechnya-Ichkeria and resulted in its quasi-full control on the territory of the republic. Throughout the time span studied here, Aslan Maskhadov played a role as a “dove” on the Chechen side, first as head of the Chechen armed forces and a signatory of “Khazavyurt.” and since 1997 as the elected president of the Republic. He was generally portrayed as having a conciliatory and compromise-oriented personality, not only when dealing with foreign relations, but also regarding his attempts to settle internal disputes (Sokiryanskaya 2014; Kavkazcenter 2019; Akhmadov and Lanskoj 2010).

At a level of foreign policy, the rise of the “doves” in the mid-1990s was reflected not only in the influence of conciliatory individuals on political decision-making processes on both sides, but

also in the Kremlin's attitudes towards international peacebuilders and third-party mediators: if multilateral channels of dialogue and negotiation were not actively sought, they were in the 1990s at least tolerated. In the months leading up to the conclusion of the Khasavyurt Agreement, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and its "OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya" under the leadership of the Swiss diplomat Tim Guldimann played a particularly central role as an international third-party mediator. It was this "Group" that hosted the talks of the Chechen and Russian delegations and carefully accompanied the key actors ready for dialogue on both sides, supporting them against the "hawks" in their own constituencies (Guldimann 1998). As a result, the negotiation process of 1995–96, although marked by great difficulties and setbacks, resulted in a rapprochement especially in the military sphere.

The rise of "doves" in the aftermath of "Budennovsk" was followed by their gradual marginalization and the subsequent triumph of "hawks" on both sides. The military pacification enshrined in the Khasavyurt Agreement was not followed by a more comprehensive process of conflict resolution. On the Russian side, many, especially among the security sector, felt humiliated by the military defeat and Moscow's retreat from the Caucasus, and as a result hardliners who were forced to resign after "Budennovsk" were rehabilitated on the political scene during the following years.<sup>8</sup> On the Chechen side, too, the interwar period starting in August 1996 brought with it a constant tug-of-war between the "doves" (seeking a political arrangement) and the "hawks" (refusing all cooperation with Russia), with the international policy of Chechnya's non-recognition and isolation, and persisting rule of law problems at an internal level contributing to the Islamic radicalization and regionalization of the insurgency (Roshchin 2014; Wilhelmsen 2005). At the same time, "doves" like President Maskhadov, who desperately tried to prevent the Chechen state and society from crumbling apart, came under increasing pressure (Sokiryanskaya 2014).

It becomes clear that the strengthening of the "hawks" and the marginalization of the "doves" was a reciprocal process that took place both in Russia and in Chechnya. In view of this mutual radicalization and of the renewed escalation of the armed conflict in late 1999, an even more pronounced consolidation of the Russian "no-negotiations" approach became only logical, with Russia relying on unilateral measures which were narratively legitimized as counterterrorism. Vladimir Putin, the figurehead of this new securitization of the North Caucasus, can thus be characterized as something like a "superhawk."

#### **"RIPENESS" and "READINESS" IN 1995 AND 2004: A COMPARISON**

Both hostage-takings in the focus here marked a turning point in the armed conflict: "Budennovsk" prepared the ground for the Khasavyurt Agreement, which put an end to the First Chechnya War in 1996, and "Beslan" marked the end of the Chechen nationalist insurgency and the consolidation of a

unilateral peace under Russian lead. This section discusses the (im)possibilities of broader peace negotiations during these moments.

According to William Zartman, the “ripeness” of the moment is one of the most important conditions for the opening and conducting of successful negotiations for peace. This “ripeness” stems from military exhaustion and a situation perceived as a “mutually hurting stalemate” on both (or all) sides of the conflict and is reinforced by the feeling of a past, impending or narrowly avoided catastrophe, and by the availability of a “Way Out” (I. W. Zartman 2001: 8–9). However important, “ripeness” alone is not a sufficient condition for the opening and completion of negotiations. The parties also need to be ready to seize the occasion for de-escalation, either directly or through the persuasion of a mediator, and a “Way Out” needs to be fleshed out, usually in form of an agreement regulating issues of ceasefire and de-militarization, power-sharing and post-conflict reconstruction (I. W. Zartman 2001: 2015). This “seizure” is where Zartman’s theory on “ripeness” meets with the ideas on “readiness” (Pruitt 2015; Kleiboer 1994; 1996) and “willingness” (Kleiboer 1994). Notably, with a reinforced focus on actors, the “readiness” theorists also emphasize the impact of internal developments within the parties’ constituencies on their preference for managing the conflict. Thus, the opening and implementation of negotiations for a peaceful settlement also depends on a trial of strength between “doves” and “hawks” on both sides, as was skillfully demonstrated by Dean Pruitt among others during the pre-negotiations for the Oslo peace process (Pruitt 2015: 124–27).

The tables below (Annexes 1 and 2) give a comparative overview of the contextual elements that supported or prevented peace negotiations in 1995 and 2004, following the concepts of “ripeness” and “readiness.” They show that the elements supporting the “ripeness” of the conflict for a negotiated settlement and the availability and “readiness” of responsible actors to seize this possibility were much more pronounced in 1995 and completely absent in 2005. The relative “ripeness” after Budennovsk had a lot to do with the shift of control and of the balance of power between the two sides, which, in turn, had an impact on their “readiness” for negotiations. As we have learned from Kalyvas, (2006) hostage takings and other terrorist acts are tactical attempts of one side to alter the distribution of power by showing that the other side is losing control over a certain territory. This is exactly what happened in our case studies.

The hostage crises in both Budennovsk and Beslan have hit the Russian and international public like a bombshell. Especially before “Budennovsk,” people were not much interested in the activities of the Russian army in faraway Chechnya, where the territorial integrity and law and order needed to be restored. However, the two hostage-takings suddenly brought the war to the Russian heartland and demonstrated that the Chechens could hit the enemy anywhere, causing Moscow to lose control of the situation. Such shifts in control can create a new context which is supportive (or dismissive) of negotiations. In the case of “Budennovsk,” where the power shift was in favour of the



insurgents, it made an inclusive format possible, with both parties represented at the negotiation table. After “Beslan,” on the other hand, the Chechen side emerged severely weakened, which made it easy for the Russian “siloviki” to present themselves as victors and dictate their own terms of conflict management, summarized as an approach of “no-negotiations” and *Pax russica*.

Via broadcast, field commander Basayev made public in 1995 the atrocities of the Russian army and the demands of the Chechen population for peace, causing the Kremlin, led by Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, to work hard to defuse the crisis. Whilst in direct contact with the hostage-takers, a compromise was negotiated that included the opening of peace negotiations. “Budenovsk” is one of the rare historical examples where not only was the Russian government willing to engage in negotiations with the adversary and agree to a compromise solution, but this agreement was also actually implemented and fully-fledged negotiations for peace were initiated. However, rather than ushering in a new era of conflict management, this readiness to engage in negotiations was more due to the domestic situation in Russia at that time. Military failures and high casualties among mostly very young soldiers during the first months of the Chechnya War exposed organizational and personnel shortcomings in the Russian army and led to increased discontent among the population. Furthermore, Yeltsin was in the vulnerable position of a soon to be re-elected presidential candidate and could not afford to turn the electorate against him. Also, on the Chechen side, the will to negotiate was strong in 1995. For them, “Budenovsk” was a military and political saving hand, as mobilization of the Russian and international media prevented the drift into a total military deadlock and opened up the way for the Chechens to be accepted as a party at the negotiation table.

Similarly to “Budenovsk,” the attack of Chechen combatants on Beslan School No. 1 in September 2004 was also intended by the hostage-takers to force the Russian side to accept peace, and to immediately withdraw its troops from Chechnya. However, since 1995, the situation had significantly changed: the parties had hardened, the access for independent media and civil society to the conflict zone was blocked, and all of the pronounced goals of the hostage-takers were not achieved. Locally, this de facto signified the end of the Chechen insurgency.

## CONCLUSION

The present article has identified the different mnemonic actors and their narratives about two episodes of the Chechnya Wars, the hostage crises in Budenovsk (June 1995) and Beslan. (September 2004) Similar in terms of setting and the intention of the hostage-takers, the two hostage-crises were turning points in the course of the war and potential openings for negotiations between the conflicting parties. However, the local, national, and international contexts in 1995 and 2004 were markedly different and had a defining impact on the prospects for peace.

Following conceptual reflections on “ripeness” (I. W. Zartman 2015; 2001) and “readiness” (Pruitt 2015; Kleiboer 1994), the situation in 1995 was rather promising for negotiations and the opportunity was at least partially seized by key actors on both sides. With the support of the OSCE as a third-party mediator this resulted in an inclusive process of negotiation and a partial peace agreement, including a ceasefire and demilitarization, as well as a declared commitment to broader negotiations on the political status of Chechnya in the future. In 2004, on the other hand, the moment was not “ripe” for negotiations at any level: there was a stalemate, but it was not “mutually hurting,” because it unilaterally suppressed the Chechen side by military force. Furthermore, legitimate actors who would have been willing and able to push for a negotiated solution were blocked or killed on both sides. And last, but not least, the political context was different in 2004, with a severely decimated and internally divided Chechen independence movement at the local level, a consolidated and increasingly authoritarian and militarized political apparatus at the level of the Russian state, and a clear international prioritization of the global “War on Terror” at the expense of local human rights and freedoms of self-determination.

However, context is not the only thing that matters. A key finding of this article is the influence of internal divisions on the “ripeness” of the conflict and the “readiness” of the involved actors for a negotiated settlement. The article identifies “doves,” who seek a negotiated solution and a full-fledged settlement of the conflict, and “hawks,” who push for a unilateral, military peace on both the Russian and Chechen sides. During the two episodes examined here, however, the distribution of power between these two internal groups was unequal, which had a considerable impact on the dynamics of the conflict and the prospects of a settlement. After “Budenovsk”(1995), the situation was rather advantageous for “doves”: the “hawks” in Russia had not been able to deliver the swift military victory they had hoped for, the political landscape was highly fragmented, and the political establishment and the security sector were kept in check by an active and fairly strong civil society. On the Chechen side, the key actors were united in their fight against the Russian aggressor and stood firmly behind the idea of their own national project. With “Beslan” (2004), on the other hand, the “hawks” on the Russian side consolidated their position, and access was blocked from the outset for “doves” willing to negotiate and for critical civil society actors. Similarly, on the Chechen side the radical forces had strengthened and the various groups were strongly divided among themselves. As a result, the “peace” that followed the end of the armed struggle in 2004 was less than ever based on a negotiated settlement involving various conflict parties and interest groups; instead, these negotiations meant that a unilateral *Pax Russica* was maintained through the use of massive control and military force.



## ANNEX 1: RIPENESS

Contextual elements supporting or preventing negotiations	<u>1995</u> Budennovsk hostage crisis	<u>2004</u> Beslan hostage crisis
<b>Local developments (Chechnya, North Caucasus)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chechen nationalist movement at its heights (+++)</li> <li>- Effect of “Budennovsk” consolidation of Chechen statehood (+++/-)</li> <li>- First Chechnya War ongoing; heavy military losses on both sides (+++)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Political fragmentation of the Chechen nationalist movement (-)</li> <li>- Second Chechnya War ongoing; war fatigue of Chechen population and government (+++)</li> <li>- Regionalization and Islamization of the insurgency in the North Caucasus (-)</li> </ul>
<b>National developments (RF)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- RF: Yeltsin prepares re-election (+++)</li> <li>- 1993 Constit. Crisis → vulnerability+fragmentation of state (+++/-)</li> <li>- Consolidation of the security sector (-)</li> <li>- First Chechnya War ongoing; heavy military losses on both sides (+++)</li> <li>- Active civil society (+++)</li> <li>- Active role of indep. media publication of Chechen grievances (+++)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2000 Putin to power; consolidation of central government; no need to accommodate political adversaries (-)</li> <li>- “Counter-terrorism” as a new master narrative; legitimization of the use of force (-)</li> <li>- Participation of civil society blocked (-)</li> <li>- Selective media coverage (-)</li> </ul>
<b>International developments (Western states and international organizations)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Western states and IO’s reluctant to interfere in Chechnya war, in order not to weaken the Yeltsin government (-)</li> <li>- Russian and international human rights movement exerts pressure to react on Chechen grievances (+++)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Global “War on Terror”; delegation of power to deal with Chechen separatism as a domestic matter. (-)</li> </ul>

**Sources:** table conceptually inspired by the “ripeness” and “readiness” literature, see notably (I. W. Zartman 2001; 2015), (Pruitt 2015) and (Kleiboer 1994).

**Legend of symbols:**

- (+++)
  - (-)
  - (+++/-)
- Element supporting “ripeness”  
Element hampering “ripeness”  
Element with unclear impact

**ANNEX 2: AVAILABILITY AND WILLINGNESS OF ACTORS**

Contextual elements supporting or preventing negotiations	1995 Budenovsk hostage crisis	2004 Beslan hostage crisis
<b>Chechen combatants and government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hostage-takers at home celebrated as heroes (+++/-)</li> <li>- Head of military staff A. Maskhadov committed to negotiations in the military field → Khasavyurt ceasefire agreement (August 1996) (+++)</li> <li>- Chechen hardliners try to block negotiations, want military victory (-)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- De-legitimization of hostage-takers as destroyers of Che. statehood (-)</li> <li>- End of Chechen independence movement → no legitimate partner for negotiations. (-)</li> <li>- Radicalization and Islamization of field commanders (e.g. Basayev); turn towards Islamist “djihad” (-)</li> </ul>
<b>Russian armed forces and government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Prime Minister Chernomyrdin supports opening of negotiations. (+++)</li> <li>- Moderated representatives of the security sector (General Lebed) support negotiations → CF agreement of Khasavyurt, Aug 1996 (+++)</li> <li>- Radical forces in RF government and sec. sector block negotiation of peace agreement (-)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Heroization of the Russian security forces; prevailing of “counter-insurgency” and “no negotiations” approach. (-)</li> </ul>
<b>Russian civil society</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Russian human rights defenders and parliamentarians participant in public debates and are mandated to negotiate with the Chechen side (+++)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Potential third party mediators blocked by Russian security actors (“securitization” of the insurgency in the North Caucasus) (-)</li> </ul>
<b>International community and Chechen diaspora</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- OSCE as an active third-party mediator (+++)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- International community refrains from interference, defines “War on Terror” in the North Caucasus as Moscow’s domestic matter. (-)</li> </ul>
<b>Alternatives to continuation of armed conflict (“Way out”) settlement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sectorial negotiations for peace launched after June 1995; inclusive mechanism created for potential peace agreement; signature of Khasavyurt Agreement (+++)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unilateralism (“Pax Russica” and Chechenization) instead of negotiated settlement; domination of one actor forcing the other side to exile or underground. (-)</li> </ul>

**Sources:** table conceptually inspired by the “ripeness” and “readiness” literature, see notably (I. W. Zartman 2001; 2015), (Pruitt 2015) and (Kleiboer 1994).

**Legend of symbols:**

- (+++)
  - (-)
  - (+++/-)
- Element supporting availability and willingness  
Element hampering availability and willingness  
Element with unclear impact

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article would hardly have seen the light without the support, advice and constructive criticism of my interdisciplinary research team at the University of Bern (Switzerland). A warm thank you thus goes to Oksana Myshlovska, Carmen Scheide, Elena Natenadze, Murat Shogenov and Valentina Tanaylova. My gratitude should also be expressed to the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), which has funded our project “Remembering the Past in the Conflicts of the Present. Civil Society and Contested Histories in the Post-Soviet Space” over the past five years.

## NOTES

1. See the June 1995 interview with Basayev shared in (Lavrentyeva 2014).
2. The national “Day of solidarity in the fight against terrorism” was enshrined in June 2005 in the amended Federal law on “Victory Days” of the Russian Federation (President of the Russian Federation 2005).
3. For the state-sponsored construction of a glorifying memory of the security forces in Beslan, see also (Charny 2019).
4. It was through the same platform that Basayev announced in form of a letter his authorship of “Beslan” in late September 2004, see (Kavkazcenter 2004).
5. It is striking that the combatants involved in the hostage-taking in Beslan were Muslims from the entire North Caucasus and even from abroad. According to Basayev's confession letter published on Kavkazcenter.com in September 2004, the group of combatants consisted of “12 Chechen men, 2 Chechen women, 9 Ingush, three Russians, 2 Arabs, 2 Ossetians, 1 Tatar, 1 Kabardinian and 1 Guran” (Kavkazcenter 2004).
6. For details about the concept of “securitization” see the theory of the same name developed by the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998). For Moscow’s “securitization” of the North Caucasus and Chechnya more specifically, see (Wilhelmsen 2018; Snetkov 2014).
7. For the discursive construction of the threat of terrorism and the justification of drastic counter-measures, such as military cleansing and the abolition of civic rights, see also (Lynch 2005).
8. Due to the perceived failure of the federal security forces, a number of high-ranking officials were removed from their posts in 1995; in particular, the head of FSB, Sergey Stepashin, the Minister of Nationalities, Nikolay Yegorov and the Interior Minister, Victor Yerin (Hockstader 1995; Adamenko 2020). However, except for Yegorov they soon reappeared on the political scene in a different capacity.

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