

# The Chechen Crisis and the Media

NICHOLAS DANILOFF  
SERGEI A. GRIGORIEV

**M**oscow's military intervention in Chechnya has raised the most serious questions about the New Russia. The action has split the Russian body politic, confounded the democratic reformers, caused dissension in the military and security services, and cast President Boris Yeltsin as an authoritarian leader. Only the media have emerged with an enhanced reputation.

From the start, the Russian people became disenchanted with the war in Chechnya as they viewed it over television much as Americans became exhausted by the Vietnam war. To them, the war in the Caucasus did not seem fair, necessary or unavoidable.<sup>1</sup> In national politics, the war precipitated a sharp political crisis in which political leaders tried to increase their popularity by winning new segments of the population to their side. The most obvious and dramatic shift came from President Yeltsin, who seemed to abandon the democratic camp to rely much more heavily on

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national-patriotic forces. As commentator Alexander Konovalov noted, "... the man who got his mandate from the democratic and reformist forces during the Russian elections, all of a sudden got sick and tired of acting as a democrat and decided under the current political situation it was much more appropriate to become a radical nationalist."<sup>2</sup>

For television, radio, and newspapers, the Chechen war was the third great media crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This latest challenge came on the heels of the putschist in 1991 who sought to close down the critical press, and the efforts of Boris Yeltsin to impose emergency censorship of the media during the bombing of the parliament building in October 1993. Although most branches of the Russian media suffer notable weaknesses—tendentiousness, occasional irresponsibility, corruption—Chechnya proved that the media have come of age. Despite great difficulties, the media let the truth come out.

It was not easy. Since the bombardment of the White House nearly two years ago, it has become increasingly clear that powerful government leaders are more than irritated by an unruly press. "The state should manage the press," Boris Mironov declared last summer before he was dismissed as minister of information.<sup>3</sup> Yeltsin was quite frank about the media in an address to the Duma on 17 February 1995. "Russian authorities," he said, "are still learning to operate under conditions of free expression of opinions. Sometimes they

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Nicholas Daniloff, a former Moscow correspondent, is director of the School of Journalism at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. Sergei A. Grigoriev, who worked for Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev as a deputy spokesman, is a visiting professor at the School of Journalism and Department of Political Science at Northeastern University.

lack patience. One cannot agree with some publications' attempts to turn mass media freedom into freedom from responsibilities before society."

One of the cases that Russian officials have in mind is the murder of Dmitrii Kholodov last fall. Was it insolence or responsibility for the 27-year-old reporter to investigate allegations that Defense Minister Pavel Grachev and his cronies had become rich by illegally selling Russian military equipment in Germany? Clearly, someone thought Kholodov's probing was intolerable. The journalist was killed when a suitcase, which he opened on his lap in the offices of *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, exploded. Kholodov, who had expected to find incriminating documents in the case, cried out before dying, "It was not supposed to be this way."

Kholodov's murder, whatever its reason, easily could have intimidated the newspaper and its journalists. But it did not. Editor Pavel Gusev responded energetically, promising to continue an aggressive investigation. He quickly named Iulia Khaityna as Kholodov's replacement, and she professed devotion to the cause. "I am an individual like any other in this country with whom the state can do anything it likes, but I do not feel fear."<sup>4</sup>

In early December 1994 when President Yeltsin finally took the decision to crush Chechen separatism, he and his associates hoped for support from the press. Their rationale was intended to appeal to the nation as a whole. Chechnya, they asserted, had become a center of criminality, and could not be allowed to be independent because that would threaten the integrity of the entire Russian Federation. To some extent, the Kremlin got support, especially from government-backed publications like *Rossiskaya Gazeta* and newspapers of nationalistic hue like *Sovietskaya Rossiya*. Similarly, Ostankino (the government-backed Channel 1) generally complied in giving the Kremlin's version of events even when the official account conflicted with reports from other Russian and foreign media.

But Channel 1 soon found itself in an uncomfortable position. As the military offensive became more brutal, Kremlin declarations that orders had been given to limit shelling to military objectives sounded hollow. When competing media reported that bombs and artillery shells continued to fall on civilian areas, news anchors found ways to communicate obliquely with viewers. The old Soviet art of "reading between the lines" now became the new art of "read my lips." Sarcastic intonations and body language of the hosts told viewers what the presenters really thought. And that did not accord with Kremlin assertions.

Frictions between the Kremlin and Channel 1 precipitated an important resignation from the station. Vsevolod Vilshchek, head of Ostankino's sociological unit, noted in an interview with *Izvestiya* that viewership of the competing channels, Channel 2 and NTV (Independent Television), was on the rise because of the obvious quality of their Chechnya coverage.<sup>5</sup> Channel 1's prime 9:00 P.M. news was losing viewership and attracting only an aging audience with conservative views. Possibly to curry favor with this group, Channel 1 switched its name in early December 1994 from "Novosti" back to its old Communist-era appellation, "Vremya." A chilling reminder of the bad, old days.

"People do not believe Ostankino's news and Ostankino's commentaries on Chechnya," Vilshchek said. "The emphasis in Ostankino news programs," he continued, "is clearly being placed on the evil deeds of [General Dzhokhar] Dudayev's forces . . . The half-truths, lies and disinformation being broadcast on Ostankino news air time in the past few days have created an unfavorable psychological climate around the channel as a whole."

Channel 2 of the All-Russian Television and Radio Company, however, was not so compliant and allowed a more critical view to reach large segments of the nation. The company's president Oleg Poptsov can be largely credited with the channel's emerging independence. His insistence on a robust, truthful reportage clearly irritated the Kremlin. In early January, reports circulated that President Yeltsin had prepared an order dismissing Poptsov. No sooner did the report of Poptsov's imminent ouster become known than counter-pressures from the journalistic community developed. In the end, Poptsov was not removed but the threat of retaliation hung in the air.

NTV seized the Chechnya crisis with a vengeance, and sent seasoned reporters to the scene who reported back to Moscow once a day with dramatic footage, including General Ivan Babichev's reluctance to attack and his roadside meetings with Chechen villagers. Once the blood-letting began, NTV provided riveting coverage of the damage and destruction of Grozny. These images so irritated the Kremlin leadership that some officials began talking about canceling NTV's license to broadcast.<sup>6</sup> "I would say the images presented were as dramatic and awful as anything presented to the American public during the Vietnam war—if not more so," commented Paul Janensch, former editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, now working in Moscow.<sup>7</sup>

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Which television channel did the Russians trust to deliver accurate news about Chechnya? According to the All-Russia Center for the Study of Public Opinion, NTV clearly came out on top. Of 1,595 Muscovites questioned, 31 percent favored NTV with a potential audience of 100 million; 20 percent favored the "Vesti" news program of Channel 2 with its estimated audience of 140 million; and only 16 percent believed in the reports broadcast by Channel 1's "Vremya" program, which, theoretically, could reach as many as 200 million viewers.<sup>8</sup> Another poll showed that the people clearly trusted unofficial sources of information over official ones.<sup>9</sup>

Critical newspapers like *Izvestiya*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, and *Moscow News* vigorously opposed the intervention and played to the liberal instincts of the political elites in Moscow and St. Petersburg. *Moskovsky Komsomolets* continued its crusade against the military, defaming the defense minister with impunity. In early January 1995, the newspaper published a photo-montage of a smiling Defense Minister Grachev superimposed on the bodies of dead Russian soldiers scattered across the snowy ground. Across the top of the page a headline shouted: "The least talented commander in Russia."<sup>10</sup> A few days later, the newspaper carried another photo-montage of Grachev in a stripped prison uniform. This time the title said, "Who will answer for the death of peaceful Russian citizens?"<sup>11</sup>

As the intervention wore on, it became ever clearer that neither the military nor the Kremlin's "spin doctors" had prepared well for the assignment. The attitude of the officials seemed to be: the less you cooperate with the press the better. And so unfolded a Byzantine game of professing respect for the free press while, at the same time, obstructing it. The Kremlin created a Provisional Information Center with the Russian forces at Mosdok which could have been expected to assist and manage reporters assigned to cover the intervention. That center quickly earned the reputation of being impossible to deal with. Correspondents

complained that no information was available, that responsible officials were always in meetings, and that those who were not occupied responded politely but provided no information.<sup>12</sup>

The treatment handed out by Russian officers and troops was worse, and even life-threatening. Correspondents were viewed as active impediments to the military operation, if not betrayers of the Russian cause. As in the American Civil War, journalists were largely regarded as spies who would reveal troop movements at the drop of a hat. Both foreign and

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Russian journalists reported that Russian troops fired on newsmen as they drove to the scene in automobiles. A car carrying a Reuters news agency reporter was hit; Polish journalists were fired on. Russian troops arrested an Associated Press correspondent and confiscated his film. Another correspondent for Radio Liberty was

physically expelled from the war zone and driven to Dagestan.<sup>13</sup>

One of the nastier episodes involved the spreading of false information by Russian officials. According to the Russian military, the Chechens engaged in horrible atrocities, like throwing Russian babies out of windows or castrating Russian prisoners of war. Yevgenia Albats reported an incident in which Russian troops appeared to have desecrated the bodies of several Russian soldiers, then sought to lay the blame on Chechen guerrillas. She wrote from the war zone, “It is clear why the government is trying to use all this awkward and ugly misinformation . . . The authorities did not expect that the Chechen war would be rejected by almost everyone and that even those who recently had spoken of the Chechens, calling them “blacks,” would develop a lot of sympathy for them . . . It is also the problem of the instinct of self-preservation of the authorities. I believe the words that were said here by one colonel, ‘As soon as we establish order here, we will go and establish order in Moscow.’”<sup>14</sup>

Needless to say, this kind of treatment did not encourage journalists to relay a rosy picture of the Russian military operation. Quite the contrary. Russian defensiveness drove reporters into the hands of the Chechens. Many correspondents, who had been covering events in the Caucasus, had reliable contacts with Chechen journalists and partisans. These Chechens showed up, served as guides and helped assure coverage of the war. The Chechen leadership showed a deft touch for public relations. When American freelance photographer Cynthia Elbaum was killed in Grozny, the Chechens quickly named a street after her.

There were other examples. The Chechens announced that they would surrender their Russian prisoners to mothers or fathers, and did so when parents traveled to the war zone. Chechen irregulars shared food with their Russian prisoners, and in some cases persuaded their POWs to rally to the Chechen cause. General Dudayev sent a representative, Dr. Aslambek Khadiev, to Europe and the United States to promote the Chechen cause. While on the run from Russian forces, Dudayev even scored a coup of his own. By pre-arrangement, he telephoned a seminar at Harvard’s Russian Research Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by satellite phone from his hideout and conducted an interview on his position, which was reported worldwide by Reuters.<sup>15</sup> The net effect was to help promote

the Chechen cause to the intense irritation of the Kremlin brass. "The press has been bought by General Dudayev," Boris Yeltsin declared in a fit of pique.

In the last months, it has become clear that Yeltsin and his aides were trying to mount discreet pressures on the press to soften its anti-Kremlin tone. The presidential press service, of course, was an established mechanism for relaying the official line. Direct phone calls from the presidential office to editors at Channel 1 were another. A shortage of newsprint caused some editors to assert that the Kremlin was trying to throttle the press through economic sanctions. Some pressures were reminiscent of Communist times. The Federal Counterintelligence Service, for example, issued a document that found its way into *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on 10 January 1995, accusing numerous Western research organizations

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of being fronts for American espionage. Among some 500 organizations cited were the Soros Foundations, the Hoover Institution, the Rand Corporation, Human Rights Watch, the International Research and Exchange Board, and Harvard's Russian Research Center.<sup>16</sup> While some democratic leaders laughed off this document as inconsequential, it nevertheless produced something of a chill: anyone cooperating with the named organizations might well be suspected of being a Western spy, with all the consequences that might entail.<sup>17</sup>

On 1 March 1995, Russian media suffered a major blow from an entirely different quarter. Vladislav Listyev, director of operations and one of the most popular presenters of Channel 1 television, was assassinated near his apartment in Moscow. The reasons for his murder were not immediately clear, although they may have been connected with a temporary ban on advertising on Channel 1 ordered by President Yeltsin. In any event, his death at the age of 38 was taken as evidence of the power of organized crime and the inability of the government to deal with it. The killing sparked an enormous outpouring of feeling and thousands turned out for his funeral in Moscow. His death posed a challenge for the whole journalistic community: march forward or retreat. Eduard Sagalayev, president of Channel 6, summed up the initial reaction when he said, "Even the killing of Mr. Listyev will make journalists tougher and work more professionally because they understand what responsibility rests on them for the preservation of democracy."<sup>18</sup>

Listyev's death brought to some two dozen the number of journalists killed in Russia and the former Russian states over the last eighteen months. That, in turn, reinforced the concern of journalists about their own right to defend themselves. In June 1994, Moscow journalists adopted a code of ethics that included a provision that newsmen might arm themselves for the purpose of self-defense. But their code carefully stated that in taking a weapon in hand, a journalist should be considered no longer acting as a journalist.<sup>19</sup>

Russian media have come through three major crises since the collapse of the Soviet Union—the attempted putsch of 1991; the parliamentary crisis of October 1993; and now the war in Chechnya. The energetic response of the media to threats of intimidation and suppression leads to several conclusions. First, real competition has developed among Russian media, and among widely-watched television broadcasts in particular. Competition

forces out truthful facts and raises the consciousness of the population to what is going on about them. Plurality of opinion in Russia today is real and irreversible.

Second, a credibility gap is developing between the Russian people and its government, not unlike the breach which began developing between Americans and their government beginning with the U-2 crisis under President Dwight Eisenhower. The Russian public today has developed a serious distrust of official information and favors unofficial news sources.

Third, the Russian government is irritated and upset over the loss of control over content in media. It has not learned the necessary skills to manage good relations with the journalistic community. Individual leaders resort, and will resort, to threats to induce self-censorship and respect for the official line.

Fourth, Russian journalists have tasted the "forbidden fruit" of free expression and will vigorously defend their rights to publish without prior restraint. In the crises of 1991, 1993 and 1994-1995, journalists have shown they have just as much vitality as their western counterparts.

Fifth, the assassination of editors and reporters is a tragic but special condition of Russian journalism today. While such actions may intimidate some individuals, the community as a whole is unlikely to succumb to such pressures. Terrorism is likely to raise the esteem with which the media are held by the public.

## Notes

1. The mood of the Russian people can be judged by various polls taken during the Chechen intervention. See *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 17 December 1994, 1; *Izvestiya*, 23 December 1994, 1; *Moscow News*, 29 January 29 -5 February 1995, 4-5.

2. Alexander Kononov, "Posledstviya Chechenskoi Kampanii," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 14 January 1995.

3. Nicholas Daniloff, "Ethics and Journalism in Russia," *Harvard International Review* (Spring 1995).

4. *Moscow Times*, 4 November 1994, 2.

5. Vsevolod Vilchek interviewed in *Izvestiya*, 6 January 1995, 6.

6. Vladimir Pozner, "Popytka Ogranichit' Svobody Slova," *Izvestiya*, 10 January 1995.

7. Personal telephone interview.

8. *Kuranty* (29 December 1994): 1.

9. *Moscow News*, 29 January- 5 February 1995, 4.

10. *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 4 January 1995, 1.

11. *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 19 January 1995, 1.

12. *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 27 December 1994.

13. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 20 December 1994, 2.

14. Yevgenia Albat, "Tolko to Chto Videli," *Moscow News*, 5 February 1995.

15. Transcript of the 14 February 1995 conversation is available at the Russian Research Center, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

16. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 10 January 1995, 3.

17. Russian political leader Grigory Yavlinsky, in an appearance at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 12 March 1995, described the document as "unimportant."

18. Quoted in the *New York Times*, 5 March 1995, 6.

19. Provisions of the code cited in Daniloff, "Ethics and Journalism in Russia."