



Russia

Russian Caucasus media iron curtain

Report of a fact-finding visit to Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia

June 2009

Investigation : Tikhon Dzyadko, Jean-François Julliard, Elsa Vidal

Reporters Without Borders - Europe & Ex-USSR Desk

47, rue Vivienne - 75002 Paris

Tel : (33) 1 44 83 84 67 - Fax : (33) 1 45 23 11 51

Email : europe@rsf.org

Website : www.rsf.org

After 15 years of violence, the international community has gradually lost interest in the Russian Caucasus. Reporters Without Borders visited the region to meet with some of the leading actors in Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia, which are nowadays described by Moscow as “normalised” or “on the road to normalisation.”

The fighting and bombings have for the most part stopped and the Russian federal government lifted Chechnya’s status as a Zone of Anti-Terrorist Operations (KTO) on 16 April, but the region is still dominated by tension and violence. Not a week goes by without clashes causing casualties. On 22 June, the Ingush president was seriously injured in a car-bombing. In neighbouring Dagestan, the interior minister was gunned down on 5 June, prompting a surprise visit by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev a few days later. And Moscow had to temporarily reimpose KTO status on three Chechen districts later in April.

Peace and order definitely do not prevail in the Russian Caucasus but you see relatively few media accounts of what the region’s inhabitants are suffering. Anna Politkovskaya visited the region extensively for *Novaya Gazeta* and other journalists continue to cover it, but they usually do so from Moscow or abroad. So Reporters Without Borders went to talk to the journalists who live and work there and who are unable to leave. What kind of pressure is put on these journalists? What kind of news and information does the public have access to? What are the principles that govern relations between the media and the authorities? These are key questions for the prospects of establishing democracy and peace in the region.

Reporters Without Borders carried out its investigation in all three of the Russian Caucasian republics – Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya. Its representatives met Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov¹, Ingush President Yunus-bek Yevkurov², independent journalists, human rights activists and civil society representatives.

Government mouthpieces

Whether a heritage of the Soviet era or a result of war and destabilisation, most of the local media are government mouthpieces or are regarded as such. The very few independent news media are

privately owned or were created by NGOs. Usually self-funded, they are exposed to pressure. Viskhan Abukhadzhiyev, the former head of



Photos of Ramzan Kadyrov and Dmitri Medvedev displayed at a Grozny building site.

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov’s press office, said Chechnya has five newspapers that are distributed throughout the republic, four magazines, the Grozny city newspaper and five district newspapers. It has two local TV stations that cover the entire territory (the religious station *Put* and the youth-oriented *Molodyoj*). Each district has a TV and a radio station that are “mainly entertainment-oriented but also broadcast news flashes.” There is also *TV Grozny*, which is available by satellite.

Russia’s main national TV stations – *Rossia*, *Pervyi Kanal*, *NTV*, *Ren TV* and *TRK Peterburg* – are available free-to-air. The public can also access other TV stations with satellite dishes, including international TV stations. Moscow newspapers such as *Argumenty i Fakty*, *Novaya Gazeta*, *Kommersant* and *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* are to be found on newsstands and are available “without any restriction,” Abukhadzhiyev said. “If the demand exists, the newspaper will be there. It is a market economy in which demand plays an essential role. If there is no

¹ President of Chechnya since 5 April 2007.

² President of Ingushetia since 1 November 2008.

demand for a newspaper, you won't find it." Reporters Without Borders found some of these newspapers at Grozny airport but could not confirm whether they were on sale in other parts of Chechnya.

The Chechen politicians Reporters Without Borders met, including President Kadyrov (see box on page 4), all stressed their interest in the media and respect for a profession that suffered greatly in the two wars (a list of journalists killed or missing is appended). But they expressed puzzling ideas about the social role and duties that journalists should have in Chechnya's future.

The minister in charge of the media, Shamsail



Russia

Russian Caucasus – media iron curtain

Report of a fact-finding visit to Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia

Ramzan Kadyrov : **“Journalists can criticise me. In fact I ask them to.”**

Reporters Without Borders met the Chechen president on 8 March in Grozny.

Why do you help the press so much?

Ramzan Kadyrov: Journalists are dangerous people. If I don't help them, they will work against me. They worked with the first president [his father, Akhmad Kadyrov] during the war. They were like bomb disposal experts. They served the people. They gave my father advice. As we help the entire population, it is normal that we help them too.

Are journalists free nowadays?

Ramzan Kadyrov: If journalists think they are not, they can turn to a judge or a prosecutor. They can criticise me. In fact, I ask them to. And if they do, I will do everything possible to mend my ways.

Do they?

Ramzan Kadyrov: I do everything I can not to give them any reason to criticise me.

And the foreign press?

Ramzan Kadyrov: Those who come here rarely tell the truth. They often come with orders to criticise Chechnya and criticise me. We have done a lot since the war but there are few journalists who say that.

What is a good journalist?

Ramzan Kadyrov: A journalist who tells the truth.

Do you know who killed Anna Politkovskaya? Do you think her death was linked to her work in Chechnya?

Ramzan Kadyrov: You should put this question to the judicial authorities and the secret services, not to me. A lot of the things she wrote were not true. There were people such as [exiled oligarch Boris] Berezovsky and others who were working against us. But anyway, we gained nothing from her death. It would have been more useful for us to have her seeing and covering our activities. We had no reason to kill her.

What do you say to journalists who are afraid to criticise you?

Ramzan Kadyrov: They should resign or should be fired, because they are deceiving their employers. A journalist must dare to ask all kinds of questions. I am ready to talk with any journalist about all the subjects he does not dare to raise and to answer any question.

Why did you decide to create a religious TV channel?

Ramzan Kadyrov: We have had two wars here that were caused by a misunderstanding of Islam. The warlords have used this religion against Russia. We want to show that Islam is not a warrior religion but a religion of friendship and peace, a religion that calls for good works. As a result of what we are doing now, the [Wahhabi] Arabs will have no reason to come here.

No journalist has been killed or kidnapped in Chechnya for a long time. Is this the result of your policies?

Ramzan Kadyrov: Yes, this is the safest republic in Russia. We do everything possible to keep it that way. We work day and night. The police is paid, and it does its work.

Saralyev, said: “The position of the government and the president is that journalists can write anything they want and can conduct their own investigations.” The government’s only request, he said, is that “they write objectively.” The government carries out “propaganda” activity in an effort to “reunite Chechens” after a long crisis and it assigns the media a role in this reunification policy because, “if we had not been divided, we would not have been at war,” he said.

The government has set itself several goals, including society’s moralisation, and the media are asked to make an active contribution, the minister said. This is the reason for “the creation of the [religious] TV station *Put* and the dissemination via the media of films and information that were produced to support the population’s moral development.”

Chechnya’s leaders regard the religious aspect as an essential part of their message to the population because, as one said, “all religions condemn murder, alcoholism and drugs.” It is clear from a tour of the centre of Grozny that religious fervour is encouraged. The street lights on the former Victory Avenue (now renamed “Putin Avenue”) are all topped by a crescent and a star. The downtown is dominated by a huge mosque built by



Mosque in downtown Grozny

Turkish entrepreneurs and billed as the biggest in Europe. Alcohol consumption is now banned in public places. The Prophet Mohammed’s teachings are inscribed on banners, alongside quotations by the current president and his father, Chief Mufti Akhmad Kadyrov, who was president from 2000 until his assassination in 2004.

The coverage Chechnya gets in the international news media was criticised by all the government officials we met. In their view, foreign journalists paint an exaggeratedly dark picture of the situation and systematically ignore all the positive fea-

tures of the government’s current policies and achievements.

A group of young women journalists we met in Grozny on the eve of International Women’s Day (8 March) took the same view. Asked how the situation in Chechnya has evolved, one replied: “It’s quite obvious, isn’t it? You just have to look at the city.”

The city centre’s gleaming architecture, the lights along Putin Avenue and the photos of leaders adorning building sites testify to the Kadyrov administration’s reconstruction efforts and its personality cult. But how much leeway do journalists have and do they let themselves be enlisted in the cause of reconstruction and reunification of the Chechen people with as much enthusiasm as these young women?



V.V. Putin prospect - Grozny

War-mongering media?

Khozhbaudi Borkhazhyev, the editor of *Gums* (a newspaper based in Gudermes) and president of the Union of Chechen Journalists, stressed the “singular” nature of the situation in Chechnya and described it in more sombre terms than the authorities.



Newly-built house in Grozny

“The war has just ended,” he said. “That is why all the press is financed by the government, which created it. We had newspapers of the kind you read in Europe when [Dzhokhar] Dudayev was president. It was good, but it also helped to divide society, and those divisions caused the war.” Borkhazhyev claimed not to know if there are

Russian Caucasus – media iron curtain Report of a fact-finding visit to Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia

journalists who are afraid of criticising President Kadyrov but he insisted that journalists who support Kadyrov could criticise him and that, if the criticism was well-founded, Kadyrov would take it into account. “The president is familiar with the work of the media and helps us. This is the only region in Russia where the government helps journalists so much.”

It was to express journalists’ gratitude towards President Kadyrov that the Union of Chechen Journalists presented him with a union membership card on 5 February 2008. The award was disowned the following day by the Union of Russian Journalists after several of its members threatened to resign. The Union of Chechen Journalists responded by breaking away from the Union of Russian Journalists. Borkhazhyev said the decision to give Kadyrov a membership card was only taken after it had been established that a precedent existed in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk.

Gums covers not just morality and reconstruction but also unemployment. “Even if ministers ask us to publish congratulations (...) and even if we are given information by the government and the official news agency, I am still the one who chooses the content of what I publish,” Borkhazhyev said. “Our articles can be critical. We even publish readers’ letters.”

He added that “readers are spoiled” in Chechnya because about two thirds of the republic’s newspapers are free and readers only have to pay for three of the papers that are available at newsstands – *Groznenskiy Rabochiy*, *Demokratiya* and *Chechenskiy Pravozashitnik*.



Gums

Lyoma Turpalov is the editor of *Groznenskiy Rabochiy*, one of Chechnya’s few privately-owned newspapers. He also heads the journalism faculty at the University of Grozny. He alluded indirectly to self-censorship.

“As in every political system, you have to be intelligent and refrain from voicing gratuitous criticism to avoid being punished,” he said. He counts on readers being intelligent enough to understand

³ Pro-independence president, elected in 1997 and assassinated in 2005

that when a minister’s actions are criticised, the minister is himself also being criticised. But one person is off limits – President Kadyrov. And as if to compensate for that limitation, he pointed out that it was perfectly possible to criticise the Russian president and prime minister.



Dosh

Turpalov nonetheless recognised the existence of very real difficulties in accessing information. “We were much freer in the period after Aslan Maskhadov³, we could say a lot more,” he said. “There used to be two other independent newspapers, *Chechenskoye Obshestvo* and *Golos Chechenskoy Respubliki*. But they stopped publishing more than a year ago.”

A local source said that, after an unsuccessful bid to win a parliamentary seat, *Chechenskoye Obshestvo* editor Timur Aliev said on TV that the election had been marred by fraud. Both President Kadyrov and the human rights ombudsman denied Aliev’s fraud allegations. He subsequently received serious threats

“Nowadays one is only supposed to talk about what is working well,” said one of the correspondents of *Dosh*, a Moscow-based magazine about the Caucasus. “The best period for the press was under Dzhokhar Dudayev. Articles were bolder and more honest. Lots of readers’ letters were printed. Not a single journalist disappeared or was killed or beaten in Dudayev’s time.”

Ingush desert

Just an hour and a half from Grozny, a deathly silence hangs over the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia, a silence broken by just a few dissenting voices – opposition media, the *Ingushetia.org*⁴ website, and a newspaper recently launched by human rights activists. The authorities regard the press as just a “conveyor belt” for transmitting government information to the public. As in Chechnya, there is a marked lack of political debate. There are even fewer news media.

The Ingush authorities deplore the absence of a *Dom Pechati* (House of the Press). In other parts of the Russian Federation, the *Dom Pechati* usually houses the ministry responsible for the press, several local news media (which rent offices) and the Union of Journalists. A hangover from the Soviet era, it embodies the government’s incestuous

proximity to the media and the development, albeit embryonic, of an official press which the authorities associate with a kind of “normality”. Grozny’s *Dom Pechati* is located in the city centre (see photograph below), opposite a monument to slain journalists.



Nazran, Ingushetia

© RSF

Russia

Russian Caucasus – media iron curtain

Report of a fact-finding visit to Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia

Monument to journalists killed in Chechnya



House of the Press, Grozny

© RSF



Grozny monument to slain journalists

© RSF

A monument to the “memory of journalists killed for freedom expression” was inaugurated in the centre of Grozny, opposite the House of the Press, on 11 December 2006. Journalists killed since the start of the war on 11 December 1994 have been commemorated every year on that date since then. The authorities estimate that 22 journalists were killed and 100 were wounded.

Anna Politkovskaya’s name has never been mentioned at these ceremonies.

It did not take former presidential press officer Bers Yevloyev long to list all the media available in Ingushetia. As regards print media, there are two newspapers covering the entire territory (one of them state-owned), municipal and district publications, ministerial publications, a few personal ad magazines and two independent/opposition newspapers (*Daymokhk* and *Obshchestvennaya Tribuna Ingushetiy*). Moscow-based and international publications are also available.

The Ingush population has access to the main federal TV stations and an offshoot of the Russian broadcaster VGTRK, which transmits two hours of local programming a day. Even the president’s office estimates that 60 per cent of its content is government information.

⁴ Launched in 2001 and owned by Magomed Yevloyev, who was shot dead on 31 August 2008 while detained by Ingush interior ministry agents

One of the innovations of President Yunus-Bek Yevkurov’s administration has been to get government officials to take part in a monthly “Open dialogue with the population” on the public TV station. Members of the public are able to put questions to government representatives in the programme, which is broadcast live. It is a good initiative but does not make up for the critical lack of media diversity.



Ingush Government House, Magas, Ingushetia

© RSF

Russian Caucasus – media iron curtain Report of a fact-finding visit to Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia

In this unstable and violent region, the lack of an independent press that is accessible to the entire population and the absence of a significant space for dialogue and debate leave the government and opposition in a tense stand-off.

In an interview for Reporters Without Borders, President Yevkurov indicated that he regarded the Ingush media's two main problems as violence and poor work conditions, and voiced scepticism about Ingushetia's alternative news outlets. He was more critical than complimentary about independent news websites that condemn police brutality, human rights violations and corruption. He insisted that they often got their facts wrong and that some of the articles on *Ingushetia.org*, for example, were "provocative." Journalists now enjoy real freedom of expression, he claimed, and "even the radical opposition can express itself (...) as long as it does not break the law."

Nonetheless, after you leave the president and his reassuring comments, the tension is very evident in Ingushetia.

On the one hand, the opposition is backed by a population that has been driven to despair by the government's failure to do anything about the human rights abuses. On the other hand, the authorities are sticking to their intransigent position and are unable to bring about the needed changes.

The authorities could not have taken a more rigid position on the highly sensitive issue of the death of government opponent and *Ingushetia.org* owner Magomed Yevloyev (photo), which has prompted demonstrations in Ingushetia and international pressure on the government. President Yevkurov rules out any possibility that there might have been a plan to kill Yevloyev. "It would have been easy to kill him in Moscow, where he was not accompanied by bodyguards," he said, as if that sufficed to close the matter.

The president is optimistic about the outcome of the case. Investigators say they have established the identity of the official who fired the fatal shot after Yevloyev was arrested. It is Ibragim Yevloyev, the Ingush interior ministry's chief of security at the time. He is to be charged with "homicide through negligence" while the other interior minister agents implicated in the journalist's arrest and death are to be the subject of an administrative investigation.

This means that the authorities have ruled out any possibility of bringing a murder charge against Ibragim Yevloyev or anyone else and that the case is not been treated as a priority. And the Ingush

prosecutor's office announced on 20 March that it would not after all investigate the website owner's illegal arrest, reversing its decision of the previous month. He later became Kadyrov's press adviser.



Demonstration outside the Ingush interior ministry in Nazran

If everything is back to normal and free expression again prevails in Ingushetia, why is access to the *Ingushetia.org* website still being blocked? The authorities claim that it is the Internet Service Provider who is doing this. And the president pointed out that it is still possible to access the website using a "proxy" server.

Reporters Without Borders attended a demonstration outside the interior ministry by the families of 12 terrorism suspects who have been held for more than four years pending trial. The families were worried about the health of the detainees because of the hunger strike they had launched and because of rumours of torture. At the request of the families, Reporters Without Borders raised the matter with the president. He insisted that they had not been mistreated and that they would be tried.

Yevkurov has been Ingushetia's president since last November, when the federal government appointed him to replace his unpopular predecessor. It should come as no surprise that the change at the top has made little difference to the media. The Ingush president's powers are limited and the solution to the republic's problems are not to be found in Magas, the capital, alone. Against this backdrop of "change with continuity," NGOs are playing a key role, moving into the vacuum left by a weak independent press that is exposed to threats and by state-owned media that follow orders.



Obshestvennaya Tribuna Ingusheti

NGOs filling the gap

Obshestvennaya Tribuna Ingusheti is a monthly that is published by a group of NGOs in Ingushetia. Originally designed as their collective mouthpiece, one that would encourage the public to use their services, it tackles subjects that are rarely covered in the state-owned media. Printed and distributed without government assistance, it does not aim to make a profit and for the most part is given away.

Magomed Mutsulgov, the founder of *Mashr* (Peace), one of the NGOs involved in this initiative, has long been gathering information about kidnappings, ransom demands and execution-style killings in Ingushetia. According to *Mashr*, 170 people have been kidnapped and more than a thousand have been killed since 2002. For want of news media at the time, these figures were published on websites such as *Ingushetia.org* and distributed on CDs. While the change of president has not brought an overall solution, it has allowed the launch of a newspaper.

“Previously, you could have had an announcement about the loss of a cow broadcast for 60 or 80 roubles, but you could not have announced that a man had disappeared, not even by paying thousands of dollars,” Mutsulgov said. “The authorities systematically concealed what was going on in the republic, things like shootings and bombings. Nowadays, the local television reports about the terrorist acts and disappearances. The print media have begun to write about it. And the president took the trouble to meet the NGOs and start a dialogue.”

But he quickly went on to point out that there has been no change in policy as regards abuses by the security forces. “If a policeman is arrested for an offence, you will never see it reported in the press.” He gave an example. Four men were tortured in a police station in Malgobek (40 km north of Magas) after Yevkurov’s appointment as president. *Mashr* managed to report it and Yevkurov demanded an investigation. But the policemen have yet to be arrested and their superior was promoted, he said. Mutsulgov added that he thought the solution to the Ingush chaos was to

be found in the Kremlin: “Only Moscow has the power to bring about an overall resolution of this issue.”

The tendency for human rights activists to perform the role of journalists is even more marked in Ingushetia than Chechnya, where it seems to be shouldered by members of *Memorial* or *Dosh*.

All the journalists and activists that Reporters Without Borders met deplored the poor level of news reporting being provided to the public. When news media in both Ingushetia and Chechnya have information that is too sensitive to publish, they pass it over to NGOs to put in their reports. But NGO initiatives are usually boycotted by the local state media, even when they concern social issues such as public transport or housing. This is especially so when information about the persistence of violence is provided.

This also applies to the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, which are supposed to be published in the state-owned media of the countries concerned. This does not happen in Chechnya, the NGO *Memorial* says. The only way for Chechnya’s inhabitants to learn about European Court of Human Rights decisions is through the Internet.

The activists said the current tendency in press freedom in Chechnya is increased harassment of journalists accompanied by increased self-censorship. As a result, much of the public looks to the NGOs to report problems or to try to get its rights respected.

Reporters Without Borders has for several years been supporting *Live Chechnya*, a website managed by the Union of NGOs in Chechnya (SNO). Just as *Ingushetia.org* aims to inform the Ingush public about human rights violations in Ingushetia, the SNO quickly posts any information it obtains about disappearances or the discovery of bodies in Chechnya.

The aim is to enable families looking for a loved-one to go to where the body is and try to identify it before the three-day deadline for burial has expired. After three days have gone by, bodies are buried with no name and no investigation is carried out. This helps the authorities to produce favourable statistics on the level of violence in Chechnya. Silence is essential for people to believe that peace has been restored and the violence has ended. But the facts have a way of coming out. A few days after the announced lifting of Chechnya’s status as a zone of anti-terrorist operations on 16 April, the status had to be reimposed temporarily

in several southern districts. And Chechen independence leader Doku Umarov was gunned down in a “special operation” in Ingushetia at the start of June.

The violence, corruption and economic difficulties in Chechnya and Ingushetia affect the entire region, including the neighbouring republic of Dagestan, to which the Chechen war was exported. It was a rebel incursion from Chechnya into Dagestan in August 1999 that provided one of the pretexts for starting the Second Chechen War. Called the “Mountain of Languages” because its 2 million inhabitants consist of many different ethnic groups with their own languages, Dagestan has experienced even more religious radicalisation than the other Caucasian republics. And much of its population accuses the authorities of being unable to put a stop to human rights violations.



Makhachkala, capital of Dagestan.

Readiness to compromise in Dagestan

The Russian Civil Chamber (*Obshchestvennaya Palata*), a body that advises the Russian president, organised a round table on “Freedom of Conscience and Inter-Ethnic Dialogue” in Dagestan’s capital, Makhachkala, on 10 March to bring together various groups that are normally at each other’s throats. It highlighted the government’s lack of will to control the activities of the police and to address the continuing problem of disappearances.

An argument between two women participants illustrated the divisions in the population. The widow of a murdered policeman took issue with Svetlana Isayeva of Dagestan Mothers for Human Rights, an NGO which has been helping the families of disappeared persons to organise since 2007 and which urges the authorities to investigate disappearances. Since the start of this year, it has been the target of smear campaign in the Moscow and local media, which accuse it of supporting

criminal and rebels and those responsible for various attacks.

The security situation seems to have improved slightly since Mukhu Aliyev replaced Magomedali Magomedov as Dagestan’s president in 2006. But kidnappings, which are usually blamed on members of the security forces, have not stopped. Bombings and anti-terrorist “special operations” feed the cycle of violence.

Svetlana Isayeva got actively involved in campaigning against violence after one of her sons disappeared in 2006. The indifference of the authorities led her and several other mothers of disappeared children to go on hunger strike in 2007. The Dagestan Mothers for Human Rights have been constantly active since then. According to this NGO, at least 26 people disappeared in 2007 and at least 11 in 2008. The real figures are probably higher as many families prefer not to report disappearances. When kidnap victims are later found



Photos of disappeared persons in the office of the Dagestan Mothers for Human Rights in Makhachkala

alive (as happened twice in 2008), they are sometimes subject to further reprisals to ensure that they do not talk.

The local media are reluctant to take up the issue of disappearances. Only bolder newspapers such as *Chernovik* dare to, Isayeva said. *Chernovik*’s direct rival, *Novoye Delo*, refuses to touch it. As in Chechnya and Ingushetia, it is often only the Moscow-based media such as radio *Ekho Moskvy* and the foreign media that cover disappearances. And as in Chechnya, the authorities have invested heavily in creating state-owned media that have no interest in covering this kind of sensitive story. As a result, the occasional report about disappearances in the privately-owned media is barely noticed amid all the reporting being put out by the state media. At the same time, the privately-owned media find it hard to survive this unfair competition.

A few newspapers such as the weekly *Chernovik*

(First Draft) are nonetheless holding on. Its owner, Khadzhimurat Kamalov, runs a publishing house called *Svoboda Slova* (Free Expression) which also publishes another newspaper, *Chistovik* (The Copy). *Chistovik's* key role is to act as a forum of support in the event that the authorities close *Chernovik*.



Chernovik

Pressure had been put on *Chernovik*, especially in the past 18 months. Its offices and the homes of its journalists have been searched. Charges of “extremism” and “inciting inter-ethnic hatred” have been brought against several of them. The newspaper has refused to be intimidated and has mobilised the support of readers and sympathisers at moments of crisis, such as when a search was taking place. The harassment has been prompted by articles about special operations or disappearances that have cast doubt on the official version.

One of the latest prosecutions brought against *Chernovik* was prompted by a July 2008 article headlined “Terrorist No. 1” that quoted comments by Rappan Khalilov, the head of the Dagestani *boyeviks* (rebel fighters). Prosecutor Igor Tkachev said the article broke the law by conferring on Khalilov and his “criminal band” the status of an “organised political force.” The raids he ordered were illegal as *Chernovik's* employees were questioned as witnesses, not suspects.

Kamalov nonetheless thinks the press freedom situation has improved since Aliyev was appointed president in 2006. And he sees Dagestan’s wide range of ethnic groups as offering an opportunity rather than posing a danger. As no single group can assume a dominant position, the ethnic divisions and threat of dispersion encourage a readiness to compromise and forge alliances that has not been seen in either Chechnya or Ingushetia.

Arsenal of reprisals

Media and NGOs that violate the law of silence

are exposed to all sorts of reprisals including police summonses, administrative measures, prosecutions for alleged tax violations and prosecutions on charges of “extremism” or “inciting inter-ethnic hatred.” The outcome could be closure of a website or closure of the organisation itself. News media may also find themselves evicted, unable to find new premises or unable to be printed or distributed.

More violent methods of intimidation are also used, especially in Ingushetia, where the political and social tensions are very marked. Magomed Yevloyev, the owner of *Ingushetia.org*, a website very critical of then Ingush President Zyazikov, was illegally arrested by interior ministry forces on disembarking from a plane on 31 August 2008 and was shot in the head minutes later while still in their custody. The website’s editor, Roza Malsagova, now lives in exile for the sake of her safety and the safety of her three children.

As they are living in societies in which violence and impunity are the rule, human rights activists may find themselves being followed or socially



Screen capture of the *Ingushetia.org* website

ostracised, or members of their family may lose their jobs, said Mutsulgov of the NGO *Mashr*. The editor of *OTI*, Aslan Kodzoyev, was kidnapped in the summer of 2008, taken to a field and threatened with execution if he continued to publish criticism of the authorities. He is sceptical about the possibilities of improvement. “Yevkurov understands that freedoms need to be protected but lacks the means to achieve this,” he said, adding: “if he decided the contrary tomorrow, we could do nothing about it.”

With a few exceptions, it is Russian national media such as *Novaya Gazeta* (especially its reporter, Anna Politkovskaya, before she was murdered), *Kommersant* and *Ekho Moskvy* and international media that are best able to avoid intimidation attempts and to cover this kind of story.

The authorities are obviously not happy with the

Russia
Russian Caucasus – media iron curtain
Report of a fact-finding visit to Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia

Russia

Russian Caucasus – media iron curtain Report of a fact-finding visit to Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia

**REPORTERS
WITHOUT BORDERS**
FOR PRESS FREEDOM

way Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia are portrayed by news media that are beyond their control. “I don’t recognise the region where I live in the articles published in the foreign press,” said the former head of President Kadyrov’s press service. The government is nonetheless thinking of suspending accreditation requirements for journalists who want to work in Chechnya because it has “things to show, not to hide,” he said. “We have a young and energetic president and young ministers,” he added. “We can show Grozny today, compare it with yesterday, and talk about tomorrow.”

Violence is minimised and covered up in this Caucasus “on the road to normalisation” but the tension is still visible not only in Ingushetia but also Chechnya. Behind the reconstruction statistics, the number of 16-storey buildings completed and the number of apartments and cars on sale, the issues of justice and violence cannot be brushed under the carpet indefinitely. Will human rights activists, and the few independent journalists and media, continue to play the role of watchdogs?

It is vital to support initiatives by civil society and by local and national media aimed at improving

news coverage in these republics. The foreign news media must also come back. The lifting of Chechnya’s KTO status could make it easier for journalists to work in the region. But the end of war does necessarily mean that civil society is safe. On the contrary, it is still in danger. The spectre of war has receded but the population is left to its own devices and its rulers lack either the desire or the resources to defend and enforce basic rights and freedoms. The media’s presence is essential to establish a dialogue between groups divided by hate and to try to limit the population’s radicalisation, especially religious radicalisation.



Quotation by President KAdyrov outside grozny airport: “Only actions testify to patriotism”

Appendix I: Chechnya 1993/2009: journalists killed, kidnapped or missing

1993

- Dmitri Krikoryants of the weekly *Ekspress Kronika* is gunned down near his home in mid-April (the exact date is not given).

1994

- Cynthia Elbaum, an American freelance photographer, is killed during a Russian air force bombing raid on Grozny on 22 December.

- Vladimir Zhitarenko of the Russian army daily *Krasnaya Zvezda* is shot dead by a sniper in Tolstoy Yurt, 20 km north of Grozny, on 21 December.

1995

- Jochen Piest, the German weekly *Stern's* Moscow correspondent, is killed by a rebel suicide attack in Chervlionaya (25 km northeast of Grozny) on 10 January. Vladimir Sorokin of Russian daily *Rossiskaya Gazeta* is wounded in the same attack.

- Valentin Yanus, a cameraman working for the regional TV station in Pskov (in northeastern Russia), is killed on 14 January in the centre of Grozny.

- Shamkhan Kagirov of the Russian daily *Rossiskaya Gazeta* is killed in an ambush on 12 December near Grozny.

- Maxim Shabalin and Felix Titov of the St. Petersburg-based daily *Nevskoye Vremia* go missing in Chechnya on 13 March.

- Farhad Kerimov, who is working as a cameraman for the American video news agency *APTV* and as a reporter for the Azerbaijani news agency *Turan*, is killed in Chechnya in unclear circumstances on 22 May.

- Sergey Ivano of *Nevskoye Vremia* goes missing on 4 June.

1996: 4 journalists killed, 4 journalists missing

- Viktor Pimenov, a cameraman with the pro-Russian Grozny TV station *Vaynakh*, is killed by a sniper in the centre of Grozny while covering fighting between Russian troops and Chechen rebels on 11 March.

- Nadzhedzha Chaykova of the weekly *Obshaya Gazeta* is found dead on 11 April near Grozny.

- Nina Efimova, who writes for the pro-Russian Chechen newspaper *Vozrozhdenye*, and her 70-year-old mother are kidnapped from their Grozny apartment on the night of 7 May. Their bodies are found on 9 May near Grozny. Both have been shot in the head.

- Ramzan Khadzhiyev, a reporter for the TV station *ORT*, is killed in mid-August by shots fired from a Russian tank stationed at a roadblock on the outskirts of Grozny.

- Vitali Shevchenko, Elena Petrova and Andrei Basavluk, Ukrainian journalists working for the TV station *Lita M*, are seen for the last time in Grozny on 9 August.

- Natalia Vasenina, the editor of the local newspaper *Nezavissimost*, is kidnapped by two masked gun-

men from her apartment in the centre of Grozny on 27 September. There has been no news of her since then.

1999: 3 journalists killed, 4 journalists kidnapped

- Supyan Yependyev, a journalist working for the daily *Groznenski Rabochi* and the weekly *Ichkeria*, is killed in a bombardment of Grozny on 27 October.

- Shamil Gigayev, a Chechen cameraman working for the TV station *Nokhocho*, and Ramzan Mezhidov, a Chechen cameraman working for the Russian television station *TVTsentr*, are killed during a Russian airstrike on the road between Grozny and Nazran on 29 October.

- Said Isayev, the *Itar-Tass* news agency's correspondent in Chechnya, is kidnapped on 28 March from his Grozny home by armed gunmen. He is released three months later.

- Anton Maryanov of the Russian daily *Nasheku* is kidnapped in Chechnya in January. He is released on 10 June but is kidnapped again on 15 October in unclear circumstances.

- Dmitri Balburov of the weekly *Moskovskiy Novosti* is kidnapped on 4 October in Nazran, Ingushetia. He is transported into Chechnya where he is mistreated. He is released on 13 January 2000.

- Brice Fleutiaux, a French freelance photographer, is kidnapped by an armed group on 1 October in Grozny. He is released on 12 June 2000.

2000: 3 journalists killed, 1 journalist imprisoned

- Vladimir Yatsina, a photographer working for the Russian news agency *Itar-Tass*, is shot dead on 20 February by the Chechen separatists who had kidnapped him on 19 July 1999.

- Alexander Yefremov of *Nashe Vremya*, a daily based in the Siberian city of Tyumen, is killed in the southeastern village of Kirov on 12 May by a car-bomb.

- Adam Tepsurgayev, a freelance reporter and cameraman working for several news media, is shot dead on 21 December by Chechen-speaking gunmen who have forced their way into his home in Alkhan-Kala (10 km south of Grozny).

- Andrey Babitsky of *Radio Svoboda* is arrested by Russian troops near Grozny on 16 January and is taken to a holding camp in northern Chechnya where he is physically mistreated. He is released on 29 February but is forbidden to leave Russia.

2006: 1 journalist missing

ableau

- Elina Ersenoyeva of the opposition newspaper *Chechenskoye Obshchestvo* is kidnapped by gunmen on a Grozny street with her aunt on 17 August.