

THE END OF OPENNESS:

Does Russia Have Something to Hide?

by Jessica Ochletree

Close to two decades ago, the idea of glasnost, or openness, changed the face of modern history. Put forth by Mikhail Gorbachev, it was intended to better inform the Soviet people and convince them of the necessity of reform. It resulted in the freedom to criticize the government, greater freedom for the press, more freedom of information for the Soviet people and improved international relations with the democratic world. Today, in President Vladimir Putin's post-Communist Russia, the very idea that helped bring about the end to decades of repression is under attack.

Central to the problem is the breakaway republic of Chechnya, where fighting continues despite the assurances from Russian officials that the war is long over. Human rights watchdog organizations have claimed that the government's strategy of cutting off scrutiny and portraying the situation as normalizing, coupled with labeling their operations in the region as anti-terrorist, will lead to a diminishing of interest in the area and allow Russian forces to step up what appears to be an already brutal campaign. Troubling stories that suggest a return to Soviet-era secrecy and censorship under Putin's administration have been coming out of Russia for the past several months. International observers, from humanitarians to journalists, are increasingly restricted from entering the country or performing their duties, while domestically the government turns its attention to their own media.

In the last weeks of 2002, Russia expelled two major international observers. On December 27, the government announced it would end its ties with the American Peace Corps, citing changing economic and social tasks facing the country. In the months prior to this announcement, the Russian government had refused to renew volunteers' visas, accusing them of spying and gathering information about "the sociopolitical and economic situation in Russian regions, about employees of organs of power and administration and about elections." Meanwhile, the deputy speaker of Parliament criticized volunteers for knowing too little about the areas in which they work¹. Then on New Year's Eve, Russia announced that it would be shutting down the mission in Chechnya of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe when its mandate expired at midnight, leaving Chechnya without any permanent international monitoring. The 55-nation organization oversees conflicts across Europe and Central Asia, but in Russia they are now limited to providing relief aid. The small mission, based in the Chechen city of Znamenskoye, had overseen relief and economic projects while criticizing Russian forces' human rights abuses against civilians³.

In October and November, a proposal to limit the media coverage of terrorism passed in both the upper and lower houses of Parliament. The proposal consisted of several amendments that would ban broadcasters and publications from spreading any information deemed probable to hamper the conduct of anti-terrorism operations or endanger the lives or health of the people involved. This includes the dissemination of information on the technology, weapons, ammunition, or explosives used in anti-terrorist activities. The amendments specifically forbade the broadcasting of "propaganda or justification of extremist activity," effectively preventing the public from hearing the viewpoint of any radical group staging an

attack. Sinisterly, it also included a measure releasing the authorities from the obligation to return the bodies of slain attackers or to reveal where they are buried, giving rise to the fear that it would be used to cover up extra-judicial killings⁴. Although President Putin eventually vetoed this measure, he did send it back to Parliament, asking for a less restrictive version. However, its success in Parliament suggests an ideology among those in government that the public should get its information from official rather than independent sources, an ideology seen in action the month before. Police officials refused to publicly identify the knock-out gas used in the October 2002 hostage situation in the Moscow theater, which was later blamed for 117 of the 119 hostage deaths, nor were they forthcoming with information for the families of those hospitalized.

The Russian Press Ministry also issued a set of media guidelines in November. The sixteen recommendations for media professionals range in topic from being sensitive to the feelings of the victims' families to consulting law enforcement officials before publishing any terrorist demands⁴. While these guidelines are not legally binding, there has been much criticism raised in media circles about the motive behind releasing such a statement. The guidelines have no legal status, but create a troubling precedent. The Union of Russian Journalists responded by issuing its own draft that encourages journalists to monitor their own behavior⁵.

The suggested guidelines do make some sense when applied to specific short term terrorist situations, such as the October hostage situation, where delaying the release of sensitive information will protect the lives of hostages. Advocates are concerned, however, that no distinction will be made and that they will be applied to the war in Chechnya as well. The French media watchdog Reporters Sans Frontiers claimed that the guidelines were likely to increase censorship of the Chechen conflict and curtail press freedom. "Russians already lack reliable and independent news sources about the situation in Chechnya. Such censorship must not be strengthened and entrenched under the pretext of a fight against terrorism."⁶

The rights of combatants are also under attack, as rumors of extra-judiciary killings and torture may attest. It is to be hoped that the conflict can be brought to a peaceful conclusion, but this must be done through ethical means, not indiscriminate violence and strong-arm tactics or by targeting civilians.

In human rights terms, this is not just a question of free speech or access to information; it is a question of the documentation of abuses. Journalists and human rights advocates who are involved in the dissemination of information are invaluable tools in documenting the actions in situations of duress and ensuring that all actors either act according to the codified moral norms of conflict, or if they do not, ensuring that they will be held accountable for their transgressions. Their ability to focus international attention on a problem region has the capacity to prevent human rights abuses through the threat of accountability, either individually or politically.

The most important goal should be to protect the safety and rights of civilians who are more and more frequently caught up in the consequences of secession. Global Issues reports that "civilian casualties have been high [in Chechnya] and there has been an international outcry at the brutal Russian crackdown and indiscriminate bombing and targeting of civilians."⁷ The rights of combatants are also under attack, as

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Agencies such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented repeated violations of international law in Chechnya, including the rights of civilians protected under the Geneva Conventions, most of which go unpunished or even uninvestigated by local and federal authorities. This has created a climate in which Russian forces believe that they can continue to violate the fundamental rights of the civilian population in Chechnya with impunity.⁸ This is a belief that has been reinforced by the December acquittal of Colonel Yuri D. Budanov for the murder of an 18-year-old Chechen woman. The case was considered a test of Russia's willingness to prosecute abuses by the military. Budanov was found to be "temporarily insane" when he seized the woman from her home, took her to his room, cut off her clothes, beat her and then strangled her to death, despite the prosecution's argument that the fact that he ordered his men to hide the body shows recognition of having committed a crime⁹.

It is because of such instances that it is imperative to restore some openness to events in Chechnya. Reports indicate that the conflict is absolutely not over. Despite the Russian government's story of a peace hampered only by a few rag-tag militants, the republic is far from a peaceful place. If the manufactured impression of normalcy and the censorship of information allow international attention to wane, the consequences will be dire. Repeated abuses have proven that the Russian forces in Chechnya can not be trusted to act according to international law if they are allowed to act with impunity. That impunity is now surer than ever, guaranteed by the government's protection and the absence of independent observers.

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