

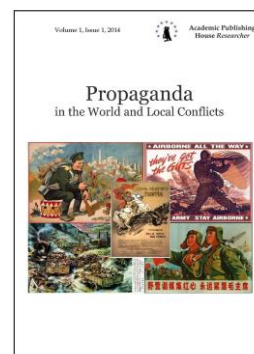
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Published in the Slovak Republic
Propaganda in the World and Local Conflicts
Has been issued since 2014.

E-ISSN 2500-3712
2019, 6(1): 25-32

DOI: 10.13187/pwlc.2019.1.25
www.ejournal47.com



The Political-Information Component in the 1994–1996 Chechen Military-Political Conflict

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Abstract

This paper draws upon an analysis of various published documents, a pool of relevant Russian historiography, and materials from various mass media outlets (above all, various periodicals from the period under review) to examine the various aspects of the political-information component in the 1994–1996 Chechen military-political conflict. The author suggests that, in covering the Chechen conflict, the Russian media (above all, the nation's print media) took different stances on the issue: some justified the activity of illegal political and military formations in Chechnya, others espoused the official position assumed by the Russian government, and still others, a rather small group, sought to cover the conflict as objectively as possible, opting to keep an open mind on the issue and eschew political bias and financial concerns. The paper examines a set of specific issues experienced by mass media at the time in covering the 1994–1996 Chechen military-political conflict. The author suggests that, judging from the process of covering the Chechen conflict, back then Russia still lacked free and independent mass media outlets committed to reflecting and protecting the interests of civil society in Russia, a direct consequence of the nation being dominated by an oligarchical system of power and a lot of its mass media outlets being run by various political forces. The paper shares the findings from an analysis of the key characteristics of media coverage of the Chechen ethno-political conflict, especially during its active hostilities phase.

Keywords: military-political conflict in Chechnya, political-information component, mass media.

1. Introduction

The events of 1994–1996 in Chechnya remain a matter of dispute amongst the Russian and international communities to this day. The Russian government has yet to resolve all of the problems that arose during the military conflict, with yet another socio-political and culturological issue having emerged in Russian history along the way. The relevance of the topic brought up in this paper is substantiated not only by the actual historical and academic factors but keen interest in it on the part of intelligent readers and deep thinkers amongst the Russian public. The military-political conflict in Chechnya was, and still is, one of the major issues for Russian society. The relevant issue that remains is why Russia's armed forces ended up losing in the first Chechen campaign. The causes are, doubtless, quite diverse: some say it is the peculiar historical development of the North Caucasus, while others set it down to the mountainous region's peculiar

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geographical location and a lack of military units specially trained to work in such conditions. There is also the effect-of-information factor.

In the context of present-day conflicts, mass media are an immense mobilizing and staggering force. They can be placed alongside such military resources as tanks and artillery, for TV and the press can be used to achieve such crucial objectives as preparing the soldiers for it morally and psychologically and boosting their morale, as well as securing public, including international, support for the conflicting sides. In today's world, in this era of rapid development of information technology mass media have become a powerful tool for managing armed conflicts. This has been attested to by many analytics experts. "In today's society, without mass media it is virtually impossible to organize a conflict – they have always been part of, and one of the frontlines in, conflicts. Every journalist, no matter how much they claim to be objective, acts within a certain field of power and bias (political, ethnical, or editorial-bureaucratic)" (Gakaev, 2001: 115). The media have an immense potential to significantly increase or decrease the scale and severity of a conflict.

The 1994–1996 military-political conflict in Chechnya revealed a set of issues in media coverage of an ethno-political conflict, especially during its active hostilities phase. Back then, Russian journalism, like all of Russian society, educated under conditions of totalitarian rule based on Communist ideology, proved unprepared for the role cast for mass media in a democratic society. The true degree of freedom of the press is tested during times of crisis. In this regard, the war in Chechnya raised a set of serious questions to be answered regarding the ability of the authorities to observe the principles of information openness and that of the media to act objectively in extreme conditions. The question is not whether information to be disseminated is positive or negative – it is rather all about a primary criterion for assessing the performance of mass media in a democratic society being the veracity and completeness of information to be provided (Informatsionnaya voina..., 1997: 89).

2. Materials and methods

The paper employs a set of various publications dealing with the activity of federal authorities – more specifically, materials from a special State Duma committee concerned with investigating the events in Chechnya, the Russian Armed Forces Command, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Federal Counterintelligence Service, as well as various nongovernmental and human rights organizations. It draws upon the reminiscences of some of the actual participants in said events, which reflect the various aspects of the Chechen military-political conflict, shedding some light on media coverage of the events. The paper makes use of periodicals of varying social-political focus from the period under review which covered the conflict. It draws upon various historiographical research studies on the subject. The work employs a multi-factor approach, a historical-systemic method (to explore the study subject by way of singling out its particular structural elements, studying their direct and mediated functions, and investigating their relationships between each other and with the whole), and scholarly-critical analysis.

3. Discussion

The 1994–1996 Chechen military-political conflict has received limited coverage in the literature. This gap has mainly been filled by general-audience works, most of which are, of course, full of various subjective estimations by the authors. Yet, they offer a few definite benefits – the authors strive to share as much event-related and factual material as possible. To substantiate their viewpoint, they draw upon all kinds of sources (e.g., statutes, event participant correspondence, and materials from the periodical press), and supplement their writing with full-text sources specifically at that. Accordingly, these works are distinguished by being large in volume. It stands to reason that this genre features a wide variety of works, with each author focused on substantiating a certain view of the events that took place. The most successful works in this respect include those by N.N. Grodnenskii (Grodnenskii, 2008) and A.A. Lyakhovskii (Lyakhovskii, 2006). Other publications that merit a mention are those by A.S. Kulikov and V.S. Runov (Vse kavkazskie voyny Rossii, 2013) and A.G. Mikhailov (Mikhailov, 2002), which combine the features of a memoir source and a research work. One of the key drawbacks of these works is their subjectivity, which is reflected in variance in estimations regarding key issues such as the legality of the declaration of independence by Chechnya, the causes of the Chechen crisis, and the reasons

behind the entry of Russian troops into the republic. For instance, N.N. Grodnenskii is of the view that Russian policymakers had taken more steps toward reconciliation (it is them who would initiate the peace talks), but the Chechen leadership would most of the time ignore these peace-building endeavors, letting the situation get out of control and call for more resolute measures (Grodnenskii, 2008: 142). On the other hand, in the view of A.A. Lyakhovskii, it is, actually, the Russian side that ruined the talks, bringing to nought the possibility of getting away without forceful intervention (Lyakhovskii, 2006: 158). We are inclined to believe that the truth is somewhere in the middle. A.A. Lyakhovskii points out that, during the early-1990s' climate of the USSR breaking up and the Union Treaty getting signed, Chechnya could have had a real chance to become a sovereign republic if its leaders had been guided by legal loopholes rather than loud slogans (Lyakhovskii, 2006: 121).

As regards research works, while there, of course, is a pool thereof, most are of a theoretical and summarizing nature. The most noteworthy in this respect is the research on ethnology and ethnography by V.A. Tishkov (Tishkov, 2001). The scholar has devoted some attention to the religious aspect of the Chechen problem as well. A study by N.F. Bugai and A.M. Gonov (Bugai, Gonov; 2004) examines the key principles of Russia's national policy in the North Caucasus in the late 20th century. V.V. Chernous (Chernous, 2001) dwells in his study upon the socio-political facets of the Chechen conflict. Of particular interest is a monograph by A.V. Malashenko and D.V. Trenin (Malashenko, Trenin, 2002) which investigates some of the key issues in Russia's policy in the South (broadly, the Caucasus and Central Asia) and analyzes the religious factor and the evolution of Islamic currents in the region. The scholars have come to the conclusion that the Southern dimension became in the late 20th century a determinant for Russia's policy.

Worthy of a mention is a collection of articles by a number of prominent experts in Caucasus Studies, entitled 'Chechnya: From Conflict to Stability' (Chechnya: ot konflikta k stabil'nosti: (problemy rekonstruktsii), 2001), which explores a wide variety of issues associated with the Chechen Republic in terms of ethnography and ethnology, conflictology, economics, and the post-war situation.

Scholar V.V. Degoev (Degoev, 2003) explores Russia's relationship with the Caucasus as a whole and Chechnya in particular. As regards the actual situation in the Caucasus in the late 20th century, the scholar questions the willingness of certain authors to look for the roots of the Chechen crisis within the period between the 18th and 19th centuries. V.V. Degoev points out that, while there, of course, are certain coincidences, the real causes of the war in Chechnya had increasingly been coming into being spontaneously – so it would be more rational to locate them in the late 20th century. Scholar D.D. Gakaev (Gakaev, 1999) explores in great detail the political processes that had been unfolding in Chechnya starting in the late 1980s and provides a detailed analysis of the causes of the situation that resulted. Another major work that illustrates the situation in Chechnya on the eve and during the conduct of the military operation is a book that is founded on conclusions drawn by the Parliamentary Commission on Investigating the Causes and Circumstances of the Emergence of the Crisis in the Chechen Republic, better known as the Govorukhin Commission (Komissiya Govorukhina..., 1995).

Thus, the findings from a study of historiography on the issue attest to a certain amount of work having been conducted in terms of investigating the 1994–1996 Chechen military-political conflict, including media coverage thereof at the time. However, there are very few summarizing scholarly works that provide an in-depth analysis of most of the key aspects of said issue that is based on comprehensive study of various source materials.

Another area that is worth looking at is memoir literature. Some of the well-known works in this respect include the books 'My War. The Chechen Diary of a Trench General' (Troshev, 2001) and 'The Chechen Relapse. The Notes of a Commander' (Troshev, 2003) by General G.N. Troshev, 'Heavy Stars: Reminiscences' (Kulikov, 2002) by General A.S. Kulikov, 'General Staff with no Secrets' (Baranets, 1999) by Colonel V.N. Baranets, and other memoir sources. So what is common to these books? It, above all, is the fact that each of the above authors took an actual part in said events, and each of them endeavors to get across to us, in their own, raw, words, the period's actual state of affairs and give their own estimation regarding the events and people who took part in them.

A special place in exploring said issue is occupied by analysis of the period's periodical press. To note, many of the sources appear to contradict each other. The same events are viewed from

different angles in, say, *Voenno-Promyshlennyi Kur'er* and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* or in *Soldat Udachi* and *Logos*. And that figures, as each paper has an ideological and political focus of its own and tries to pursue interests and views of its own. This particular source most often serves the purpose of immersing one in the atmosphere of a particular era and giving one an idea of what kind of news people were exposed to and in what light information was presented to them at the time. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* has been invaluable to the search for published documents. *Voenno-Promyshlennyi Kur'er* is known to have more than once published soldiers' reminiscences. For instance, its 2005's Issue 13 carried an article by Sergei Smirnov entitled 'A Battle, not a Slaughter (The Truth and Lies about the Special Operation in Samashki)' («[Voenno-promyshlennyi kur'er](#)». 2005. №13) – it is this article that served as a departure point for my own investigation and analysis of the events of April 7-8, 1995. The existence of this source has been substantiated in documents of a relevant State Duma committee and in the memoirs of well-known general G.N. Troshev. The article provides an initial groundwork for further research into the issue.

4. Results

In covering the Chechen conflict, the Russian media (above all, the nation's print media) took different stances on the issue: some justified the Chechen resistance movement (associating it with fighting for freedom, independence, etc.); others espoused the official position assumed by the Russian government ("Chechnya is an integral part of Russia, so any armed groups are illegal and are subject to elimination"); still others (the smallest group) sought to cover the conflict from a centrist standpoint, opting not to take sides and not to rush into extremes. These differences in covering the conflict may be explained by the different stances assumed by specific mass media, as they reflect the interests of distinct social groups and population strata. Thus, as a consequence of social differentiation and the emergence of special interest groups, there occurred corresponding changes in the political focus of various mass media outlets as well, depending on the views of the portion of the audience toward which the outlet was oriented, as well as depending on whose interests the outlet was catering to. This is why the events in Chechnya, which had provided the groundwork for infighting amongst Russia's social, financial, and political forces, received that kind of coverage in the press, which reflected, like in a mirror, the battle that was going on the Russian political Olympus ([Mikhailov, 2002: 243](#)). As quite rightly put by prominent Chechen historian D.D. Gakaev, "a key characteristic of media coverage of the situation in Chechnya was a transformation of mass media outlets' stances at certain stages in the development of the conflict: if during the first Chechen campaign (1994–1996) most mass media outlets treated the Chechen resistance movement with a certain degree of empathy and often covered the events from the Chechen side, during the counterterrorist operation begun in 1999 virtually all mass media outlets now justified the operation, viewing it as a way to protect Russia from threats coming from Chechnya, which they deemed to have become a base of international terrorism" ([Gakaev, 2001: 51](#)). Collective violence requires an image of the enemy represented by a group or an institution that must be punished or destroyed. The image of the enemy is created and then cultivated by the initiator of violence for the purpose of supplying its executors with a means of mobilization and a direct objective. When violence reaches a stage of war, i.e. results in a conflict with a front-line and all necessary organization, the image of the enemy is simplified to what is referred to by the military term 'opponent'. V.A. Tishkov writes in this regard: "Yet, here too what the conflicting sides implied by the term 'opponent', or 'enemy', was pretty vague. With the Chechens, it was an umbrella term for what they normally referred to as 'federals', 'Russians', 'invaders', 'aggressors', and 'infidels'. On the contrary, to Russian federal soldiers deployed in Chechnya the term was synonymous with 'thugs', 'dukhi' (spooks), 'nokhchi' (Chechens), 'chichi' (monkeys), 'militants', and 'terrorists'. From the very beginning and on through the entire conflict the Chechens were invariably 'them' to most of the Russian military personnel, despite the fact that these were their fellow citizens, many of whom could even have served in the same army with them" ([Tishkov, 2001: 156](#)).

Over the years of the Chechen conflict, the portrayal of the enemy in Russian propaganda had undergone significant changes. At the beginning of the conflict, the enemy's force was deliberately understated – someone was "speculating for a fall". An example of this kind of tactics is the following statement by Russia's then-Federal Security Minister S.V. Stepashin: "It is not the Chechen people who are fighting. The fiercest resistance is being put up by Afghan mujahideen and mercenaries from the Baltic states, including female snipers". A year or so later, the enemy was

now portrayed as a “large army – virtually, the entire male population”. When it became necessary to explain why the military operation had failed, they resorted to hyperbole: “an army that is good enough to measure up to that of any other European nation”. At the start of the conflict, one predominantly employed terms like ‘dudaevtsy’ (Dudaev’s guys) and ‘brigand groups’, with the ethnic attribute avoided. The same mindset was being cultivated amongst propagandists in the army: “One was not pursuing the objective of fostering hatred toward the Chechen people. Quite on the contrary, soldiers and sergeants were being persuaded of the common people having nothing to do with the Dudaev regime”. However, it did not take long before the media stopped being so “soft” on things. Here are a few publication titles to illustrate this: ‘The Troops Pounding the Chechens. The Chechens Trying to Answer Back’, ‘The Nokhchi Seething with Fury’, ‘The Nokhchi Scattering into the Woods, Trying to Break through the Russian Blocks’, etc. Now it was no longer just the “dudaevtsy” but all Chechens as such who were being urged to “quickly go cap-in-hand to the Russian people, who have done so much for them and have never gotten anything in return, except bloodshed and violence. Do this voluntarily. It will be good for everybody: for the Chechens and for the Russians. If the Chechens keep being cocky – there will be trouble” (Tishkov, 2001: 267).

The image of the Chechen kept getting transformed by journalists. During the first Chechen campaign, individuals engaged in military activity as part of illegal armed groups were referred to as militants. During the period between 1996 and the start of the counterterrorist operation in 1999, the image of the enemy changed to the one as an armed bearded Wahhabi with a fanatical facial expression. However, Chechen militants, who considered themselves a winner and who had instituted an army of their own and put in place a system of military ranks, did not wish to be viewed as “militants”. And that led to certain oddities. Some media outlets had to apologize for calling a Chechen a ‘militant’. Page 3 of 1999’s Issue 27 of *Obshchaya Gazeta* contained a regrettable error in the caption of a photo taken by Reuters at the Chechen border. As a result of an inaccurate translation from English, the individuals shown in the photo were referred to as ‘Chechen militants’. In actual fact, they were soldiers in the regular army of Ichkeria who were guarding the republic’s border. The editorial board later had to apologize to the Chechen border patrol and the photo’s author. However, as early as the start of the second Chechen campaign, and especially after the US had declared the global war on terrorism, Chechen armed groups would increasingly be referred to as ‘international terrorists’ («*Obshchaya gazeta*». 1999. №27).

As early as the start of the anti-terrorist campaign in the summer of 1999, Russia’s public opinion gave virtually total support to the policy pursued by its government and military. Basaev’s raid on Dagestan and the nighttime explosions in the Russian cities proved to have helped achieve the principal objective – to prepare Russian public opinion for the hard-power way of resolving the Chechen problem and the entry of Russian troops into Chechnya. Both the government and society backed the new military campaign unanimously.

The second Chechen campaign was preceded by an unprecedentedly intense anti-Chechen campaign in the Russian media in conjunction with terrorist attacks in Moscow, Volgograd, and Makhachkala, which claimed the lives of hundreds of civilians. And yet again the only ones to blame were all the Chechen people. Russian Federation citizens of Chechen nationality would be prosecuted on a mass scale. For two years, Russian viewers and readers would be shown and told what kind of society the Chechens were building – a society in which it is legal to practice slavery and taking prisoners for ransom is considered to be a “lucrative business”. Footage of prisoners being tortured and abused, executions of people by firing squad in Grozny squares, and threats of terrorist attacks from rebel leaders – all this produced an effect. But the Chechen rebels could now no longer hope for compassion on the part of the Russian media, unlike in the period 1994–1996. Here is what *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* had to say on the matter: “It is worth noting that the time is much more propitious today than it was in December of 1994. Today, public opinion in Russia, and around the world, is ready for this kind of campaign, as it has been prepared for it by mass media. If in the period 1994–1996 journalist reports on atrocities committed by Russian troops abounded in the media, now in the event of a new war the Chechens may face an information blockade: most reporters will think twice before making up their mind to work in an area that is being controlled by people who used to take their fellow workers hostage and who had, basically, legalized slave trade” (Rotar', 1999: 28). The authorities and the military would eventually impose tough censorship on information from the conflict zone.

Nonetheless, it is crystal clear now that the information war was lost. So what were the causes of the defeat? In the war of ideologies the Russian secret services had kept neutral, refraining from taking up ideological arms against militant Islamic extremism, despite the fact that the latter was quite vulnerable in its conceptual foundations. But the war with it had to be waged exclusively from Islamic perspectives and in the language of the “laws of the mountains”.

In the Caucasus, dying with a weapon in hand is regarded by many as luck, a reward for the person’s brave deeds, and a ticket to paradise (Plutser-Sarno, 2005: 198). Accordingly, it is possible to punish a Moslem mountaineer only after proving to them that they have committed a deadly sin by betraying Allah and violating the laws of the mountains. Propaganda would have to be strictly Islamized and based on all kinds of facts of the violation of the laws of Islam. But on the part of the Russians there was nothing put forward except some bellicose statements which, unfortunately, could have an effect only on the “Russian mind” and were not quite comprehensible to the Chechen one. One can only wonder now how it would all have panned out if the information war had been conducted in a competent and neat manner...

The media can, and, essentially, must, work to eliminate any negative images from mass consciousness. This work must be conducted in a gradual and stage-by-stage manner. Above all, a conflict must be covered in an accurate, fair, balanced, and comprehensive manner. Of course, sometimes it is impossible to obtain a clear picture of what we refer to as ‘the truth’, ‘facts’, or ‘the objective’. A journalist must aspire to this ideal, but, when the situation is ambiguous, it may be worth furnishing, or at least making references to, the different viewpoints that exist on the conflict so as to enable the audience to judge the situation for themselves. Next, it would make sense to cover things within a certain context – not just cover it. Conflicts often arise against a backdrop of complex historical claims, which may be laid by various societal groups and may be of a territorial nature. In covering a conflict, it is especially important to be able to place all the events within a context, or else their purport may be unclear to the audience. Despite numerous obstacles and restrictions that may hamper a journalist’s coverage of the context, there is compelling reason to present the events’ background as completely as possible – so as to provide insight into the issue’s complexity. It is important that one provide insight into the conflict’s complexity, or else too simple an explanation may be facilitative of too simple a decision, e.g. get a large stick, an axe, etc. It is worth taking into account that the media tend to focus on covering the actual events – rather than the talks process or the daily life and views of the civilian population in the conflict zone. This pressure is often from the editors, who tend to demand reports on a “major event”. One ought to devote more time to the talks process and the daily life of the civilian population, rather than concluding that instances of violence are an accurate reflection of the actual state of the relationship between the groups. Lastly, in order to be able to accurately cover all of the conflict’s aspects, the journalist must ask the opinions of people who are familiar with both sides of the conflict – historians and specialists who speak both languages or are engaged in the study of the various cultures and ethnic groups involved in the conflict.

5. Conclusion

The Chechen crisis revealed many key issues in media coverage of an ethno-political conflict, especially during its active hostilities phase. Back then, Russian journalism, like all of Russian society, educated under conditions of totalitarian rule based on Communist ideology, proved unprepared for the role cast for mass media in a democratic society. The true degree of freedom of the press is tested during times of crisis. In this regard, the war in Chechnya raised a set of serious questions to be answered regarding the ability of the authorities to observe the principles of information openness and that of the media to act objectively in extreme conditions. The question is not whether information to be disseminated is positive or negative – it is rather all about a primary criterion for assessing the performance of mass media in a democratic society being the veracity and completeness of information to be provided (*Informatsionnaya voina v Chechne*, 1997: 89).

Judging from the process of covering the Chechen conflict, back then Russia still lacked free and independent mass media outlets committed to reflecting and protecting the interests of civil society in Russia, a direct consequence of the nation being dominated by an oligarchical system of power and a lot of its mass media outlets being run by various political forces.

Conflicts and wars have set the global community on edge throughout history. With us living in the 21st century now, the spread of the ideas of humanism, tolerance, and compassion should have been facilitative of military conflicts being resolved with less violence, but, judging by what the media report to us each day, things are exactly the opposite. In newspapers and magazines, on radio and TV we keep hearing about cruel acts of violence, both in war and in peace, with mass media being a crucial tool for managing a conflict.

Meeting the interests of Russia and those of all the Caucasus peoples and fostering safe and sustainable development in the unique region will require that all participants in shaping Caucasus policy act in a responsible and well-considered manner. The path the Caucasus is currently on and the current Caucasus policy may require a major overhaul. Without major change in this respect, the Caucasus will find it hard to actualize its potential in the 21st century, as it will still be hampered by conflicts. This is neither in the interests of the Caucasus peoples nor of Russia.

It is particularly worth noting that the 1994–1996 Chechen military-political conflict has taught many lessons to both policymakers and the military. On top of that, it, above all, has revealed that you cannot demand success from the army when it is lacking moral support and is even being disparaged by contemporaries and denigrated by the actual national media. It is a no-win situation for the entire nation if someone is trying to undermine the spiritual foundations of its Armed Forces. As rightly noted by a researcher, “in these conditions, of particular significance is trust among the government, society, and the army. If the government is to send its soldiers to war, it ought to protect them from unfair bashing and try to counteract attempts to foster a negative attitude toward them” (Putintsev, 2003: 93).

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