

How has Russia framed the conflict in Chechnya as part of the 'War on Terror'?

Written by Steven Hawkes

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/07/30/how-has-russia-framed-the-conflict-in-chechnya-as-part-of-the-%e2%80%98war-on-terror%e2%80%99/>

STEVEN HAWKES, JUL 30 2011

The contrast between the nationalistic sentiment of self-determination emphasised in the First Chechen War and the rhetorical transition towards radical Islam in the Second Chechen War has been highlighted by many as evidence of the significance of the Chechen conflict in the global 'War on Terror'. A deliberate portrayal of the conflict in terms of the fight against international Islamic terrorism in the post-9/11 world has occurred by the Russian government, lending legitimacy to their methods and goals in the region. This essay will examine how Russia has managed to illustrate the Chechen conflict in terms of a global fight against international Islamic terrorism, and the validity and implications of this. The rhetoric and media coverage of the conflict as a counter-terrorism operation have proven particularly valuable after 9/11, and by 'playing the Islamic card' (Russell 2005: 111), Russia has been able to carry out the war without accountability. However, the role of the international community, the Chechen separatists, and the foreign Islamist jihadis themselves must also be scrutinised, as all three could be complicit to some extent in this depiction of the conflict as part of a global jihadist struggle, rather than a fight for Chechen independence and self-determination.

Russia has gone about portraying the conflict in Chechnya as 'an anti-terrorist operation...fighting the threat of international Islamic terrorism rather than secession' by utilising the 'War on Terror' as an 'overarching conceptual prism' (Snetkov 2007: 1352). The main feature of this has been the use of rhetorical action both at a governmental level and through the official media. It has proven to be a powerful instrument for Russia to designate the Chechens as Islamic terrorists 'immersed in the totalitarian ideology of global jihad' (Souleimanov 2008: 1200) rather than as fighting for the freedom of their homeland. To emphasise the 'Al-Qaeda connection', Russian officials have regularly exaggerated the international Islamic presence in Chechnya and across the North Caucasus, despite a lack of substantial evidence (Trenin 2004: 91). The framing of the conflict in terms of a 'Clash of Civilisations' has been highly politicised, being presented as part of a new, larger and more endemic threat to both Russia and global security rather than the alternative of a Russian 'attempt to retain legitimacy and explain away the failure to resolve the Chechen crisis' (Snetkov 2007: 1362).

Meanwhile the state-controlled media has reported the conflict in these terms, and 'all coverage is compatible with official aims' (Kramer 2005: 257). In 1999, the Putin Administration ordered all Russian news media to refer to the Chechen resistance fighters as 'terrorists' rather than designations such as 'rebels' or 'insurgents' (Russell 2005: 108). This manipulation of the media has been compounded by an attempt to maintain popular support by heightening anti-Chechen sentiments and 'Caucasophobia' among ethnic Russians, and this has been achieved by demonising the Chechens as representatives of international Islamic terrorism (112). The Russian response to terrorist attacks such as the Moscow apartment building bombings of September 1999 has been to demonise the entire Chechen separatist movement, invoking a Russian desire for revenge and inevitably contributing to the atrocities committed by Russian troops in Chechnya.

In addition to this, the state clampdown on independent media, and any reporting of the conflict in general, led to a lack of outspoken opposition. In an attempt to restrict negative reporting, Russia has banned the media from Chechnya as part of their waging of 'information warfare' (109). Journalists attempting to report on the Chechen

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conflict have come under huge governmental pressure, including beatings, intimidation and disappearances (Kramer 2005: 257). Criticism has not been tolerated, as tragically demonstrated in the case of Anna Politkovskaya, an outspoken critic of Russian policies in Chechnya (Politkovskaya 2004) who was murdered in 2006.

The post-9/11 international political climate proved particularly favourable to Russia's depiction of the Chechen conflict by retrospectively justifying their policies towards Chechnya. Vladimir Putin has taken 'every opportunity' since 9/11 to present Russia's conflict with the Chechens as a 'component of the coalition's overall struggle with Islamic insurgents' (Russell 2007: 90). Western leaders including George W. Bush and Tony Blair notably drew parallels between the Russian and American experience of combating international Islamic terrorism (94). Meanwhile the phenomenon of 'traumatised democracies' led to an expression of mutual empathy between the United States and Russia, with terrorist attacks resulting in 'intensified feelings of insecurity, an intolerance of any opposition to sometimes quite drastic counterinsurgency measures and an ambiguous attitude to both the norms of international law and the reaction of world public opinion' (Russell 2005: 109). Thus, the West has shown passivity towards Russian policies in Chechnya, including a noteworthy lack of criticism of the widespread atrocities and human rights abuses throughout the conflict. This passivity occurred even at public level, with the mainstream media polarising the conflict as merely another front in the 'War on Terror', thereby marginalizing moderates. Perhaps an alleged 'complexity fatigue' on behalf of the general public is an issue here (Russell 2006: 961).

Active collusion between Russia and the West has even been suggested on the Chechen issue, as the U.S. attempted to win Russian backing in the UN Security Council for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. At this time, the U.S. added three Chechen groups to the Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTO) list in an attempt to show solidarity with their newfound allies in the 'War on Terror' (Hughes 2007: 295). By doing so, the U.S. gave an 'immense boost to Putin's attempt to win international credibility for Russia's claim that the war in Chechnya was part of a global war on terrorism' (296). The events of 9/11 proved to be 'a powerful catalyst for Russian-American rapprochement', with the extent of co-operation between these unlikely allies resulting in the U.S. toning down any criticism of the brutal methods used by Russian troops in Chechnya (Trenin 2004: 204).

However, it must be acknowledged that Russia's claim that the Chechen conflict is part of the 'War on Terror' is not totally baseless. Links do exist between the Chechen rebels and Arab terrorists in the Middle East, facilitated by Chechnya's religious ties and the place of the North Caucasus in the grand narrative of global jihad (Mukhina 2005: 520-522). The 'Islamic factor' has certainly gained more prominence than it had during the First Chechen War, with methods, symbols, and rhetoric showing the influence of the radical Salafists upon the previously secular values of the Chechen separatist movement.

The Chechen use of tactics such as suicide bombing and mass-hostage taking have led to accusations of an alliance with al-Qaeda (Moore 2008: 425), whilst the events at both the Dubrovka Theatre and the Beslan School were dominated by radical Islamist rhetoric. Influential foreign mujahideen such as Ibn al-Khattab, of Saudi origin, have latched onto the movement and proceeded to frame Chechnya as part of a global jihadist struggle (Vidino 2005: 58). Furthermore, it must be noted that Islamist raids into Dagestan, ordered by Khattab and Shamil Basaev, were the chief factor in the launch of the Second Chechen War by Russia (Kramer 2005: 212). Despite this, although 'foreign financiers and ideologues...played a prominent role in the Chechen resistance movement in the second conflict' (Moore 2009: 90), a 'complexity of unholy alliances' existed with tensions between foreign fighters and Chechen separatists.

However, it is crucial to note that 'Wahhabism has not replaced national separatism as the chief motivating force' and attacks by Chechen separatists are confined to inside Russia, rather than on a global level (Kramer 2005: 252). The majority of Chechens have not adopted a wider Islamic fundamentalist cause, and global jihad is not their objective. Despite the arguments above, to depict the conflict in Chechnya as solely a counter-terrorist operation within the broader 'War on Terror' is a deliberate and strategic manipulation by the Russian government. By doing this, they have proven able to wage the war in Chechnya without accountability, whilst retaining legitimacy to the international community due to the fixation with international Islamic terrorism. There are many important local factors to note and the context of Chechnya is crucial, as it is difficult to generalise the Chechen conflict to other disputes.

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First of all, it must be understood that the Muslim community itself is divided in Chechnya, with the Sufi majority differing substantially in religious practice to the imported Salafist minority, who are estimated to make up 10% of the Chechen population (Bowker 2004: 466). Indeed, there is a considerable degree of hostility from the Sufi majority, who feel the radical minority and its links to international terrorism have 'poisoned' their 'valid claim for independence' (Nivat 2005: 418). Furthermore, the locals are keenly attached to local customs and traditions, which are opposed by the Islamists, and associated the foreign newcomers with problems of drug trafficking and organised crime (Souleimanov 2008: 1208). The implementation of Shari'ah courts proved unpopular with many, and the reaction to Salafi ideals by the majority of Chechens was distinctly lukewarm. Additionally, the scale of any external forces has always been limited in Chechnya, estimated at just 200 at any given time (Wilhelmson 2005: 42-45).

The radicalisation of the Chechen resistance movement after the First Chechen War seems to have been largely as a uniting factor and tool of mobilisation. The legacy of Imam Shamil and the Chechen cultural narrative was invoked in the form of Islam to unite Chechens around the banner of independence, and this certainly proved to be 'a useful mobilising tool' (Wilhelmson 2005: 36). The idea that 'money can buy ideas' (40) in a desperate region is important here, as the financial and human resources provided by external Islamist groups seem to have far greater importance than their ideological and spiritual meaning.

Indeed, it has been frequently commented of the Chechen conflict that 'Islam is but a cover for very secular pragmatic objectives in economic and political spheres and the religious renaissance is merely a convenient tool for attaining separatist ends' (Trenin 2004: 73). Even in the horrific events of the Beslan School Siege of 2004, and the Dubrovka Theatre in 2002, terrorist demands never exceeded the local agenda of independence for Chechnya and a cessation of hostilities, showing that even this resort to terrorism may have been 'a purely rational decision motivated by practical expediency rather than imported fanaticism' (Souleimanov 2008: 1213).

This pragmatism would suggest that jihadists 'mistakenly identified Chechnya as a new bridgehead in their world struggle' (de Waal 2004: 60) and would lead to the conclusion that Russian treatment of the conflict as a counter-terrorism operation is erroneous. Despite this, the Chechen emphasis on Islamic fundamentalism, even if it is merely 'spiritual clothing', has facilitated Russia's efforts to portray Chechnya as a vital battleground in the 'War on Terror'.

Russia's generalisation of all Chechen separatists as part of international Islamic terrorism resulted in a refusal to negotiate or compromise. This was despite the lack of radicalism among the moderate majority of the Chechen population, and the rejection of Salafism by the leader of the separatist movement, Aslan Maskhadov (Souleimanov 2008: 1211). Offers of negotiation by Maskhadov were rejected by Russia, thereby alienating moderate Chechens and forcing many into alliance with the radical warlords (Wilhelmson 2005: 50-1). The paradox of this refusal to compromise, as with much counter-terrorism policy, is that it inevitably created 'fertile ground for further recruitment' into the ranks of the extremists (53).

Furthermore, it is important to consider the underlying factors contributing to the radicalisation of Chechnya, including: their current and historical repression at the hands of Russia; corruption; poverty; socio-economic desperation; and the persistent violation of human rights. The conflict itself inevitably radicalises many, especially when alternatives to military resolution are rejected by Russia. The 'disastrous extent of abuses' by Russian troops in Chechnya, including extortion, beatings, torture, kidnappings, murder, and rape (Trenin 2004: 210), have served to reinforce the Chechen perception of injustice. Meanwhile due to the framing of the conflict as part of the 'War on Terror', there is a distinct lack of condemnation from the international community. Criticism after 9/11 gradually became 'the sole domain of NGOs', and the U.S. and Europe turned silent on the issue, with the only exceptions being Poland, Denmark, and the Czech Republic (Souleimanov 2008: 1203).

The current situation in Chechnya is one of 'Chechenisation' of the issue, by handing it over to the pro-Russian President of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov. Whilst this has stabilised the situation somewhat, Kadyrov has shelved hopes of independence, thereby polarising the issue as one between the pro-Russian administration and international Islamic extremists. However, the radical elements of the Chechen separatist resistance are 'home-grown...stemming from the brutality of the first war' which 'destroyed Chechen society and left behind a gaping hole that is still unfilled' (de Waal 2004: 55). By framing the conflict as part of the global 'War on Terror', Russia has

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perhaps created a self-fulfilling prophecy in demonising the Chechen separatists and marginalizing moderates. Indeed, any who refuse total surrender are perceived by both Russia and the West to be advocates of Islamic terrorism (Russell 2005: 113).

To conclude, the Russian framing of the Chechen conflict as part of the global 'War on Terror' has been carried out by Russia for strategic goals. The deliberately misleading representation of Chechen separatists as 'terrorists' has occurred by demonising them and linking the conflict in Chechnya to the global struggle against international Islamic terrorism. However, external factors in the Chechen conflict are limited, and it is far more likely that 'its horrors have been bred locally' (de Waal 2004: 55) by centuries of repression culminating in the brutality evident in both Chechen wars. Russia has gone about this portrayal by utilising the power of rhetoric and the media, whilst the events of 9/11 and the ensuing launch of the U.S-led 'War on Terror' proved to be an invaluable opportunity, which was fully exploited.

By successfully linking the conflict in Chechnya to Al-Qaeda and international Islamic terrorism, Russia gained backing from the international community and its actions were therefore legitimised, as by default their opponents were 'terrorists'. Whilst the Chechen resistance movement remains largely focused on goals of independence and self-determination, Russian policies and polarisation of the issue have resulted in the radicalisation of many. This is evident in the growing extremist Salafist minority, who wield significant influence. The desperation of the Chechen people pushes them into the arms of the extremists, albeit largely for pragmatic reasons to aid their local agendas. However, whilst their objectives remain localised, their methods grow increasingly brutal and desperate, as shown in the tragic events of the Beslan School Siege. By demonising the Chechen separatist movement and associating it with international Islamic terrorism, Russia may have succeeded in legitimising their own actions. However, the dangerously cyclical nature of violence, coupled with the increasing desperation of the Chechen people, could well result in the conflict descending into further chaos in the future, with no real diplomatic end in sight.

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Date written: October 2010