

Explaining the International Community's Response to the War in Chechnya

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In between his night at the opera with Tony Blair and his tea with Queen Elizabeth, Vladimir Putin refused to see Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, when she was in Russia in April. That Putin was able to snub a representative of the UN investigating war crimes but then was embraced (literally) by Western statesmen and royalty is one of many reminders that this war is not front and center for policymakers dealing with Russia.

Why is this the case? Most Westerners believe that the war in Chechnya, however horrible, is an internal matter and should not interfere with or at least not influence the West's relations with Russia. Many add that given Russia's nuclear weapons, what could the West do anyway? NATO is hardly ready to rush in. Yet the international community does sometimes interpret human rights abuses as worthy of decisive response, and there are many options available to states and international organizations short of using force. So why the comparatively muted response to Chechnya? I argue that few of the conditions necessary to stop human rights abuses have yet been created.

Russian Spin

Certainly one influence on how the war is perceived inside and outside Russia is the fact that the Russian government has done a masterful job of controlling the media, a lesson policymakers learned from the last war in Chechnya. The Russians packaging this war for the media are the same ones who fashioned the brilliant re-election campaign of Boris Yeltsin in 1996 (remember: this was a candidate who polled in the single digits six months before the election and who won reelection while secretly in the throws of a heart attack). These people now run Rosinformatsentr, the one-stop-shop where you can get all you need to know about the "anti-terrorist" operation in Chechnya.

To achieve this media control, the Russian government is doing what all states do: control public access to the battle zone. Such control, in theory, should ensure that the West believes what the Putin government wants it to believe about Chechnya.

However, abundant and consistent testimony gathered by organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Physicians for Human Rights, the Russian group "Memorial," the French groups "Doctors of the World" and the Nobel Peace Prize

Winner "Doctors Without Borders," indicates that something else is going on. Testimony points to systematic and indiscriminate use of force against both civilians and those who care for the wounded. Evidence suggests that Russia is in violation of the Geneva Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Among the most powerful pieces of evidence is a survey done by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR). This organization recently interviewed 1140 refugees from Chechnya who were displaced by the war to Ingushetia. Compared with a similar one they did in Macedonia with Kosovar Albanians in the summer of 1999, the PHR survey suggests that the level of violence committed in Chechnya by Russian Federal Forces against the civilian population is quantitatively greater (with as many as four times the number of civilians killed) than in Kosovo--a situation which roused the international community to action.

A few Western journalists have also witnessed the nature of the violence. French journalist Anne Nivat--who had been in Chechnya for much of this latest war until she was escorted out by the FSB in the middle of February--painted for me a particularly vivid picture of a Russian bombardment that she experienced on February 1 from 11:30 a.m. until 5:15 p.m. in Alkhan-Kala (which was said at the time to be controlled by Russian forces). Her account is very similar to those gathered by Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) detailing bombardments in late January-early February in places such as Katyr-Yurt and Aldi. Nivat considered it a miracle that she had lived through it. Not a house was left standing.

Lessons Learned

So, if violations have been documented, and the international community responded recently when presented with a smaller degree of violence, why isn't more being done about Chechnya? The reasons for this are numerous and complex.

First, the victims have no clear face in the West. The plight of the civilian population in Chechnya blurs for most people with the violence of the rebels. Put simply, the Chechens have a PR problem. For the most part, they have a terrible image in the West, and they have done little to change it. To the outside, the government of Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov tolerated kidnapping and lawlessness. The videos that the Russians show on TV (and have been seen in the West) reveal Chechen rebels executing and even decapitating victims, many of them Russian troops.

Then there is the human rights community inside Russia. Anyone who has been involved with Russian political and social activists--as I have both as a practitioner and a scholar for the last six years--knows well how disorganized they can be. What is really striking is how, in contrast to the PR machine that runs the Kremlin, these groups are not even sure what a "media strategy" is, let alone have one that they are trying to implement.

One must hasten to add that even if Russian NGOs mounted a media campaign, they need a media to which they can gain access. Placing stories is expensive according to all

reports. Many journalists are reluctant to cover stories for free, especially if they contradict the Kremlin line. Add to this the fact that many Russian journalists have been frightened by the treatment of Andrei Babitsky, the reporter for Radio Liberty who was beaten and called a traitor by Putin for his critical reporting of the war in Chechnya. The Kremlin's PR machine has convinced many Russians that Babitsky was in collusion with the rebels, and deserved the torture he experienced in Chernokozovo, a "filtration camp" in Chechnya.

Western NGOs are experiencing constraints as well in mobilizing a campaign against the abuses in Chechnya. These groups are so busy documenting atrocities that there is little time or money to mount a campaign to stop the war--though it is unclear that they even see this as part of their mandate. Make no mistake; they have proof of crimes committed against civilians that need to be investigated. They have lots of evidence of Russian non-compliance with international norms and humanitarian laws. But they have yet to link up with the human rights community inside Russia on these issues. And they have yet to circulate this information in a compelling, coordinated way to international organizations and states that do have the power to put pressure on the Russian government to investigate the allegations of atrocities.

An unfortunate example of not getting information out in a timely way occurred recently. Physicians for Human Rights should have had their powerful survey on the desks of the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) in Geneva in April as the Commission debated a response to the war. While the UNCHR did pass a resolution (25 in favor, 7 opposed and 19 abstentions) calling for a national investigation into abuses, the resolution might have been more strongly worded with more states in favor if members of the Commission had received the information from PHR.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, is also responsible for how this resolution was worded and its vote. After all, the vote followed her visit to Russia. There, she was prevented from seeing what she wanted to see, and Putin refused to meet with her. But instead of insisting in strong, clear language on the need for an international and a national independent commission to investigate human rights abuses, she mumbled something about the need for an investigation (for how could she not). According to human rights groups around the world, and most importantly inside Russia, she dropped the ball: without an international commission working along side a national one, few think a national review will be independent of the Russian state.

The UNCHR is joined by NATO in sending contradictory messages to the Russians. As more and more evidence of atrocities and filtration camps in Chechnya surface, one realizes that NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson's rapprochement with Putin in February occurred during some of the worst moments of the war.

I learned in a series of meetings with NATO officials that they grow weary when they are told that evidence from Chechnya suggests a situation more gruesome than the one that prompted them to respond with force in Kosovo. "We need to have good relations with the Russians," they plead. I argued that they need to make every encounter count. As is,

NATO engagement with Russia appears permissive of non-compliance with international laws and not just in Chechnya. NATO sends mixed signals to the Russians on many different levels. For example, NATO consistently categorizes the interaction of NATO troops with Russians serving in Bosnia as a success. Yet many human rights groups have evidence that Russian SFOR troops in Bosnia are trafficking in women from Eastern Europe. For the most part, NATO officials in Brussels and in Bosnia do not deny that trafficking occurs, but most shrug their shoulders over what to do about it. One high ranking military official even took a "boys will be boys" attitude.

Of course a different response is possible: several years ago, when confronted with Russian troops trafficking in Eastern Slavonia, Croatia, Jacques Paul Klein, now the UN Mission head in Bosnia, flew to Moscow and threatened to make this story public unless the Russian General Staff disciplined its soldiers. The Russian military responded immediately by replacing their troops. The trafficking stopped, and the Russians were instrumental in catching an individual indicted for war crimes.

In terms of abuses in Chechnya, the problem is not that international organizations are doing nothing. The problem is that the response is inconsistent and uneven. While NATO pursues a business as usual approach, and the UNCHR issues a resolution guaranteed to make no one happy, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) suspended Russia's voting rights. Although in May PACE will take up the matter of Russia's expulsion from the Council, most observers think this slap on the wrist is the end of the matter.

Conclusion

To date, several important ingredients necessary for stopping human rights abuses are absent in the case of Chechnya. The victims are difficult to distinguish from the villains. From studies on other human rights campaigns around the world, from Chile and Argentina to China and Burma, the presence of an organized domestic NGO community is necessary and must be linked up with the transnational NGO community. In Russia, the NGO community is fractured and disorganized. Scholars who have studied the abolition movement in the United States, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and other human rights campaigns tend to agree that states generally follow civil society in condemning these situations. States, international organizations, and specifically decision-makers tend to respond to pressure from civil society--from NGOs, both local and transnational. This is not to say it is all the responsibility of civil society to stop abuses; states have the ultimate power to do this. But in this case, the absence of coordinated strategies from NGOs both in Russia and the West and inconsistent responses from the international community have done little to effect change in Russia on this issue.

It is worth thinking about the lessons Russians are likely to take away from this second war in Chechnya. Surely, one is that the use of force against its own civilian population actually costs them very little in their dealings with the international community. For

those inside and outside Russia that have a stake in Russia developing as a democracy, that is a tragedy.

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