RUSSIAN CRISIS MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA MANAGEMENT UNDER PUTIN

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This paper was given at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology held in Lund, Sweden in July 2004.
Introduction.

The mass media are a well recognised, important tool of image and identity construction, which has an established tradition in the former Soviet Union. In the contemporary setting of fluid identity and attempts to create a unifying identity and consciousness, the role of the mass media has assumed an important and strategic role. Early on in his presidency, Putin signalled that a leading role was to be assigned to the media through statements such as the creation of a single information space and in the policy document *The Doctrine of Information Security*.¹ Media Minister Mikhail Lesin in his speech while congratulating Russian journalists on their professional holiday (January 13) gave an indication of the envisaged road for the media to take.

“The importance of your work is determined not only by your ability to communicate objective information to the audience. We are building a single information space and are uniting the country.”²

Changes to the way that State owned and controlled mass media assets are structured and managed has aided in a more uniformed control. These changes have also assisted the authorities in bringing some further measure of control of the privately owned media too. The authorities are assuming a bigger role in the capacity of the Gatekeeper, as a new set of unwritten but clearly understood rules and guidelines of acceptability are instituted. A process that can be hard to detect as the mechanisms and manoeuvrings are becoming internalised and beyond the public gaze. But, why do the Russian authorities go to so much effort in controlling the content of the mass media during a crisis?

Three case examples are given briefly in this paper, to demonstrate the above mentioned practices and tendencies. Restrictions on time allocated has meant, that to some extent these cases have been somewhat simplified. However, the essence of what is happening is

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preserved. The paper concludes with the consequences of authority/media relations that occurred and the response by the authorities and the mass media in reaching some form of ‘amicable’ agreement with regard to future reporting of crises.

**Changes to State Media Structure and Organisation.**

The Yeltsin administration laid the framework for providing effective means of silencing dissenting media. Although Yeltsin, on the surface at least, did not consistently seem to favour censoring the mass media his legislation has left a legacy that could provide such an opportunity for an administration which does not exercise such restraint.

Yeltsin achieved this potential tool in a state media ‘restructuring’ exercise. On May 8, 1998 Yeltsin issued a decree that brought all local state stations and government owned technical facilities (such as transmitters) under sole jurisdiction of RTR. This meant that RTR could impose punitive measures or preferential charging for resources. Under such conditions, commercial TV was dependent on RTR for technological support. Ultimately, this ends with an ability to censor TV broadcasting, whoever controls RTR is also able to exert pressure on other TV stations. And RTR is state controlled.

The federal and local governments have other advantages that can be used to apply pressure on media outlets in a subtle manner. One of the few areas of industry yet to be affected by privatisation is the sector involved with the production and distribution of newsprint. “The state also dominates to a large extent the domestic production and distribution of newsprint.” Ultimately, this means that if a print media outlet becomes involved in some form of conflict with the authorities they can be effectively closed down through price hikes or simply the denial of newsprint.

The method of placing ‘reliable’ people into key areas of media organisations is

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becoming more common place again. This trend has been especially noticeable since mid-2002, in relation to individuals with close connections to the Kremlin being appointed to pivotal posts within the state-owned media. This move could be perceived as being a possible early preparation for the 2003-2004 electoral cycles.

On the 17\textsuperscript{th} of June, 2002 Marat Gelman announced in an interview to the newspaper \textit{Gazeta} that he had been appointed to be the Deputy General Director in charge of political analysis and public relations for \textit{ORT}. He was quoted as saying that:

\begin{quote}

"I will help correctly form the policy of the programmes. [...] I will help ORT find the right tone."\textsuperscript{5}
\end{quote}

Gelman has been an influential member of Moscow’s artistic community since the mid-1990s, he has patronised a significant number of modern artists and writers though his assets that include an art gallery, publishing house and Internet activities. He also ran a political consulting business, which had among its clients the political party \textit{Union of Right Forces}. Until late 2001, Gelman worked at Gleb Pavlovsky’s \textit{Foundation for Effective Politics} and withdrew from this pro-Kremlin organisation in May 2002 when he handed back his shares. \textit{Moskovsky Komsomolets} newspaper featured an article that cited unnamed sources as saying the heads of \textit{ORT} and \textit{RTR} had been reprimanded by Kremlin officials for promoting Putin in a manner that was too obvious and was considered to be counterproductive.\textsuperscript{6} Bearing this in mind, Gelman appears to be an attempt to address this imbalance, applying a more sophisticated approach to promoting the President.

Another appointment was made in the sphere of the state-owned media in June 2002. \textit{Novye Izvestia} wrote about the appointment of FSB Lieutenant-General Alexander Zdanovich, Chief for the FSB’s Department for Cooperative Programmes, to a senior executive position in \textit{VGTRK}. An official report stated the appointment in a neutral manner.


\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
“Lieutenant-General Alexander Zdanovich, chief of the FSB department for cooperation programs, has been appointed deputy chair of the All-Russian Television and Radio Company (VGTRK), responsible for security.”

Zdanovich is not the sole representative from the security services to find himself being an overseer of state-owned media. There are several other notable examples where this has occurred.

- General Kobaladze (Foreign Intelligence Service) appointed Deputy General Director of *ITAR-TASS*
- General Aksionov (Interior Ministry) appointed head of *TV-7*
- General Vladimir Kozlov (one of creators and leaders of FSB Anti-Terrorist Centre) was appointed Deputy Media Minister
- General Manilov (Defence Ministry) appointed to *Mediasoyuz*.

The method of the government nominating key state media personnel from the ranks of the security services was a well known aspect of the Soviet period. It has the effect of internalising the mechanisms of censorship within a given media organisation.

### Sensitive and Non-Sensitive Issues and Their Implications.

It is possible to rate an issue that appears in the mass media as either a sensitive or non-sensitive issue, depending on the importance of the issue to the incumbent political power’s ability to remain in power if their handling of the issue is perceived as being poor by the public or at least the credibility/legitimacy of the political authority is damaged or tarnished as a result of poor/inept performance at resolving the problem. The authorities’ response to sensitive and non-sensitive issues seems to vary. Sensitive issues

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8 Ibid.
that potentially threaten the legitimacy (be the threat real or perceived) of the incumbent political power structure need to be dealt with swiftly, and invariably this is done so. Some measure of leniency may be tolerated in a non-sensitive issue. However, by their very nature, crises can be threatening for the legitimacy of the existing political and social order.

Connected to the issue of sensitivity of a particular issue or theme is the nature of the event. In this paper I have classified events (in this case a crisis) as being one of two named categories; a short and intense incident or a planned and protracted incident. The nature of the occurrence of an incident has an impact upon the way it is played out in the public arena by the authorities and the mass media.

- **Short and intense** incident – this form of crisis can happen anywhere and at anytime. It is unpredictable and can catch both the authorities and the media off guard. Although usually only short in the time that the incident occurs, it is nonetheless a stressful and intense period. Normally characterised by an initial period of chaos and uncoordinated response by both the mass media and authorities. In this paper I use the Kursk sinking and the Dubrovka Theatre hostage taking as examples of this type of crisis.

- **Planned and protracted** incident – the authorities often have the upper hand in this type of incident as a period of preparation is undertaken prior to the actual event taking place. Media and informational policy are more often than not an integral part of the planning process. However, as an event is drawn out, the way or manner in which it is framed needs to be assessed, reassessed and renewed. Failure to do so, combined with maintaining an outdated frame will lead an audience to lose confidence in the source of the information and may start to look for an alternative source. The renewal of the framing needs to be conducted with care, to use ‘realistic’ and believable frames. Failure to do so will most likely result in the loss of confidence and legitimacy of the sender, by the receiver. The Second Chechen War is an example of this type of incident.
Sinking of the Kursk.

A major crisis faced by Putin, early in his term of office was the August 12, 2000 Kursk submarine disaster. The Kursk sank in a naval exercise that was intended to show the world that Russian military power was resurgent. When the nuclear-powered submarine sank in the Barents Sea, Putin was seen to be dithering, dressed in holiday attire at the Black Sea resort of Socchi. Russia’s top military chiefs also had an air of lethargy about them and gave the impression that they were more interested in Russian pride than the lives of the sailors.

Both the military and the President initially managed this crisis very badly. The Presidential Press Service, the President’s official medium of communication with the outside world, was seemingly absent from the President’s side on this crucial occasion. After the initial shock and lethargy, as a result of the shock wore off, the government’s PR mechanism began to function more efficiently once more. The government chose the ground of the information struggle. In this instance, the accident occurred in the open ocean and press briefings were delivered at a naval base of Vidyayevo. Both of these locations are difficult to access for ordinary citizens (or media personnel) due to their situation, this ensured that the government was able to act more effectively in the capacity as the gatekeeper in this incident.

The Kursk sank on August 12, the navy announced to the public the loss of the submarine on August 13. But, it was not until the 14th of August that a rescue attempt was launched and the 16th of August when Russia officially requested foreign help. By the time that Putin returned to Moscow from Socchi on the 18th of August, the reputation of the authorities were in tatters. The same day, a Russian newspaper published a list of those who had been onboard the Kursk. On the 22nd of August Putin met the families of the Kursk’s crew. Putin admitted to a “feeling of guilt and responsibility”, but at the same time attacking the media magnates for making political capital out of the disaster on TV.
He also declared the 23rd of August as a national day of mourning for the crew of the Kursk.\(^9\)

Although the naval base is a restricted area, some media personnel did manage to get access to it. The paper that had published the names of the crew, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* had managed to do so by bribing a naval officer with 18,000 roubles (US$650) for the list.\(^10\) Further damage, in addition to the inability of the Russian navy to perform a successful rescue occurred on the 18th of August. From an official point of view, the dramatic TV news footage of one of the sailor’s mother, Nadezhda Tylik being sedated by officials was a total PR disaster. She had been berating the Deputy Prime Minister, Ilya Klebanov during the public meeting. When this footage was made public on the 24th of August, accusations flew that this was a blatant attempt by the authorities to stifle criticism. However, in a subsequent interview with *The Times* on August 29, Tylik stated that she was given the injection at the request of her husband for an existing medical condition and was not forcibly injected as was previously suggested in the media.\(^11\)

A long-time news director and later president of *NTV*, Oleg Dobrodeev, left the station in early 2000. He was appointed by Putin to head *RTR*, a state channel. The station’s coverage of the Chechen War proved to be entirely loyal to the Kremlin. The level of trust which Putin’s administration had placed in Dobrodeev was shown in August 2000. After the Kursk sank in August 2000, only *RTR* was allowed close to the scene of the accident and in Putin’s meeting with the grieving relatives. Dobrodeev ensured that he would not fail his political masters in this very sensitive task, by personally editing anything, which may have proved to be politically damaging for Putin.\(^12\)

The way in which the officials handled the disaster contributed greatly to the loss of


credibility, especially for the Russian navy. Officers of the naval command lied for a week after the sinking, claiming that evidence existed that some of the men were still alive. This resulted in the creation of a false set of hopes that a miracle rescue could still occur. Another scenario planted by the naval command was that the sinking was the result of a collision with a mystery foreign submarine, either the result of accident or design. With regard to the collision theory, the authorities later shrugged this off as the result of bad ‘sensationalist’ reporting in the press.\textsuperscript{13} New claims were quickly made when old stories were either discredited or suffered from a lack of interest. Some claims made by the navy command to the press bordered on the ridiculous, as one particular statement made after the lack of interest in the mystery foreign submarine theory.

\begin{quote}
“If we raise and carefully sift through the iron of the first compartment, it is not excluded that fragments of an American M-48 torpedo will be discovered there. Or of a new analogue unknown to us for now …”\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

In an interview with filmmakers, during the shooting of the film \textit{Vladimir Putin: Leap Year} (which was shown on \textit{RTR} in June 2001), Putin described the Kursk incident as the worst experience he had endured during his first year as President.\textsuperscript{15} In contrast to the manner in which the Kursk sinking was managed by the authorities, a lot of effort was spent on making the salvage operation seem to be an open process. A special ‘press boat’ shipped nearly one hundred journalists to the site of the sinking. Engineers in charge of the operation held press conferences and released computer simulations of the events, as they were expected to unfold. The special website \url{www.kursk.strana.ru} was established in this show of openness. Igor Botnikov, the Kremlin Press officer accompanying the journalists on the boat heading for the salvage operation declared that; “We have invited the world’s journalists to what is going on here in the Barents Sea to show we have

nothing to hide with this operation.”

**Dubrovka Theatre Siege.**

Unlike the Kursk incident, the hostage taking was undertaken in a large capital city (of approximately 10 – 12 million inhabitants), which made the location of the crisis easily accessible for media workers. The government acted much more quickly and Putin was actively and publicly seen to be taking charge of the crisis from the outset. Location presented the authorities with a problem of containment. Throughout the duration of the hostage taking drama the government maintained a high profile in the Russian media. This incident lasted for some 57 hours, from Wednesday 23 – Saturday 26 October, 2002.

During this event news organisations altered their broadcasting content and even their broadcasting schedule. The TV stations *NTV* and *TVS*, together with the radio station *Ekho Moskvi* provided non-stop coverage of the crisis. *NTV* even switched to 24-hour broadcasting. The correspondents covering the hostage-taking drama worked 12-hour shifts on location. The previously entertainment only TV station *CTC* altered its programming to include news slots for a three day period, cutting back the amount of commercials shown. The state channels *ORT* and *RTR* ran frequent live reports and changed their normal programming schedule to include more serious films and documentaries. CNN used *NTV*’s footage in its own broadcasts, in a move reminiscent of the October 1993 political crisis when CNN decided to unscramble its signal so that other news broadcasters could use their footage. Steven Eke, a BBC regional analyst stated on *NTV*, “The work of the Russian media has improved immeasurably compared to the previous terrorist acts and disasters.”

As it turned out, the crisis proved to be as much a test for the mass media as it was for other institutions. Reporters who were first to arrive faced a great risk. Several reporters, including *Interfax*’s Olga Chernyak, became hostages in the theatre. One hundred journalists took turns and camped outside the theatre, several of them venturing inside to

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talk with the hostage-takers. This left the mass media with some tough decisions to make. The management were often in close contact with government officials. Some of the dilemmas that were faced included questions such as; should you run an interview with a hostage taker? Russian law forbids this, but failing to do so may endanger the lives of hostages. What do you do when the government warns you not to report information, which has already been made public? A media analyst with Radio Liberty, Anna Kachkayeva considered the mass media’s situation.

“Of course, there were many miscalculations and journalists were clearly under stress. Much was the result of government bodies not providing information on time, when the vacuum had to be filled with sometimes incompetent commentaries. But overall, journalists handled the situation in a commendable way.”

However, the balance between the freedom of speech and panicking the public with too much or incorrect information is a fine line, which is further complicated in a situation as what occurred at the Dubrovka Theatre. In a scenario that includes war or elements of war (such as terrorism), the public’s right to know needs to be balanced with security concerns (such as the safety of the hostages). A great deal of responsibility is in the hands of journalists in any crisis, particularly when real-time radio and TV broadcasts are being made. The General Secretary of the Russian Union of Journalists, Igor Yakovenko spoke of this fine balance.

“War and free speech are absolutely incompatible. To the extent to which this crisis had elements of war in it, the limitations of free speech are acceptable.”

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A prominent TV anchor, Vladimir Pozner called for the increased social responsibility of journalists without having to resort to the use of censorship.

“Journalists have neither the moral nor the legal right to become a public podium for bandits. Journalists have no right to conceal information – it is not a journalists’ function. But they have to bear responsibility for everything said and shown.”20

By noon on the Thursday, the government largely had control of the flow of information in the mass media, having established a system of ‘understanding’ and an informal set of rules. A regular supply of news was established from a crisis centre and media management formulated its policies. Two clearly defined boundaries were established with regard to pictures and mass media coverage; no interviews with the hostage takers and no information that could disclose the location of troop deployments. Media managers and spin-doctors, such as Gleb Pavlovsky, were called in to give advice, the recommendation being to restrict media access to the site. On the Friday, the State Duma Deputy Alexei Mitrofanov, called for a ban, but the motion failed to gain enough support in the house. Putin met with faction leaders on the Friday afternoon to discuss the possible introduction of censorship.21 The Media Ministry began to take an active role and started to make examples of some media outlets.

- **Moskovia** – a small TV station was shut off air for several hours under the provisions of the Anti-Extremism Law, which forbids the publication of terrorists’ statements.
- **Ekho Moskvi** – the Press Ministry threatened to shut-down the website after an interview with the terrorists was published. This was averted by the ‘voluntary’ removal of the text.

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• Radio Mayak and Rossiskaya Gazeta – rebuked by the Press Ministry for publishing a photo of a victim’s body being dragged out of the theatre on the front page.\(^{22}\)

Images are a very powerful tool in the mass media, a ‘good’ picture may prove to be very beneficial to a cause, whereas an unfavourable picture has the potential to inflict irreparable damage to a person/cause. When trying to limit the nature or type of pictures that can be shown, it has to be managed in a way that is palatable/acceptable for the public as a right and just course of action for the authorities to take. The parliamentary newspaper, Rossiskaya Gazeta was severely criticised by the Media Ministry for a photo of the crisis that appeared on the front page of the newspaper on October 25, 2002. The ministry asked journalists to consider the ‘morality’ of their coverage and asked them to be more vigilant in the choice of their photographs for publication. The then Deputy Media Minister, Mikhail Seslavinski described the ‘offending’ photo.

“The photograph on the front page of Rossiskaya Gazeta offends not only the memory and dignity of the slain hostages, but is also immoral in regard to the people who remain in the theatre and their relatives.”\(^{23}\)

Dmitri Sinyukov, the newspaper’s General Director told the news agency Interfax that management had considered the Media Ministry’s complaint and had agreed with it. He stated that the Deputy Editor Yuri Makartsev, had been disciplined and that “the editorial board in the future will be more responsible in regard to publications affecting the honour and dignity of citizens.”\(^{24}\)

The radio station Ekho Moskvi also faced the attention of the Media Ministry. Russian media had been interviewing the hostage takers by cell phone, however Ekho Moskvi broadcast a brief interview on October 24, 2002 with one of the hostage takers. A clear

message from the Media Ministry was sent to the media industry. Yuri Akinshin, a
spokesman from the Media Ministry warned the media not to broadcast such interviews
and the possible consequences should they decide to ignore the warning.

“If this is repeated we reserve the right to take all proper measures, up
to the termination of the activity of those media.”25

Late on the Friday, Press Minister Mikhail Lesin warned broadcasters that there could be some developments overnight and asked them not to broadcast, even if it was reported by the news agencies, in order to avoid triggering violence. Shortly after midnight the TV stations ceased broadcasting from the site and began to run films instead. The security forces stormed the theatre that night.26 In an interview that was published in the newspaper *Izvestia*, Lesin was quoted as saying that the Chechen terrorists had a distinct media plan prior to the event.

“However, the terrorists’ propaganda mechanism is operating quite competently and skilfully. There is great danger in showing pictures of the terrorists or allowing them to speak. They are criminals. To enable them to campaign for their ideas, so that new people might join them and resume the terror, is flatly wrong. All terrorists demand live broadcasts; this is one of a terrorist’s goals. Giving them such rights means provoking more terrorist attacks in the future.”27

According to the findings of a poll that was released in October 2003, Russians approved of the handling of the hostage crisis. However, when asked about what led to the deaths of 129 hostages, a majority pointed to the use of gas and inadequate medical back-up when the hostages were freed. This poll was conducted by the agency *ROMIR*,

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which questioned 1500 Russians and had a margin of error of 2.6%. 9 out of 10 respondents thought that a similar raid could happen again.

- 22% positively assessed the action of the authorities
- 41% viewed their action as rather positive
- 24% viewed the action as rather negative
- 8% saw the incident as negative
- <33% blamed the use of gas for the death of the hostages
- 26% blamed the terrorists for the death of the hostages
- 20% attributed the death of the hostages to inadequate medical assistance.  

The Director of VTsIOM Yuri Levada tied the jump in Putin’s approval rating to the hostage crisis at the Dubrovka Theatre (23-26 October, 2002) in Moscow.

“Leaders’ approval ratings typically increase when a country feels itself in danger or under attack, as U. S. President George Bush experienced after the attacks of September 11, 2001.”

The conclusion of the crisis was as confusing as its conception. Many questions and uncertainties remained, concerning the hostage takers, the state of the security services, the actions of the authorities to name a few. How did the heavily armed hostage takers enter Moscow undetected during the prosecution of the ‘anti-terrorist’ operation in Chechnya? Did the authorities consider all rescue possibilities carefully before choosing the gas option? Just how many people did die during the rescue? It would appear that many questions, such as these, might go unanswered as a result of the ‘fog’ that surrounds the available information on this crisis.

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Alexei Pushkov, the anchorman for an analytical programme on *TV Tsentr* drew a comparison between the United States and Russia, in the wake of the hostage taking drama. “What is the lesson? We can no longer be immune. This was our September 11.”

**Media and the Second Chechen War.**

In March 2001 a statement was signed by a group of reporters from the local branch of state-owned media, VGTRK, complaining about biased coverage and only giving one side of the story. This protest action was the first of its kind, which has been recorded in the Chechen conflict. The journalist’s statement was clear and concise. Part of the statement went as follows:

> “Since the very start of the anti-terrorist campaign in Chechnya, the Russian media, in particular *ORT* and *RTR* television, purposefully kept quiet about the true number of civilian casualties. [...] The truth, even if it is bitter and not always pleasant, must appear on our TV screens.”

The ‘Information War’ which is running parallel to the fighting was active before the outbreak of open hostilities. It is fought as a battle of credibility, the winner of this particular fight intends to win the hearts and minds of their audience. Both the pro-Moscow and the anti-Moscow factions use their position to exclude reporting that may prove to be harmful for their cause and have built-up their own media groupings to disseminate their desired message. It is my intention to give a perspective of Moscow’s informational strategies and goals in the Second Chechen War.

One of the first steps used to limit journalists coverage of the unfolding conflict was the *Law on the Fight Against Terrorism*. A Russian Information Centre was soon established, however its credibility was damaged by the strict adherence to the official line on

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information dissemination guidelines. In January 2000, presidential aide Sergei Yastrzhembsky initiated organized tours for journalists around Chechnya, under the escort of Russian army officers. These groups of journalists consisted largely of foreign journalists who had accreditation. Plans were launched to ‘weed out’ those who may prove to be ‘troublesome’ elements of the press corps before they had even entered the territory of Chechnya. Journalists who had covered the First Chechen War were denied an entry visa by the Russian Foreign Ministry. This action effectively shut them out of the area.  

The official line in how the ‘Chechen Problem’ is framed has changed with time and circumstance. Language employed by the authorities is designed to vilify and dehumanize Chechens in order for the Russian public to more readily accept the conflict. Initially, the conflict was framed as an operation to contain and then to remove the Chechen threat after the apartment bombings and the armed incursion by the rebels in 1999. Excesses allegedly committed by the rebels appeared in state owned and controlled mass media outlets. For example, in the beginning of the Second Chechen War the news agency ITAR-TASS cited one of the commanders of the North Caucasus Military District and wrote “the Chechen bandits themselves mine residential buildings and blow them up when federal aviation appears in the sky.”

September 11, 2001 provided the Russian authorities with an excellent opportunity to mute international criticism in their handling of events in Chechnya. It saw the ‘internationalisation’ of the Chechen conflict via the internationalisation of terrorism. Although, the war in Chechnya was still regarded and treated as an ‘internal’ matter by Russia. This strategy, in light of world events, proved to be effective as the interests of the US and Russia converged.

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As time has progressed the theme of the official message began to concentrate on the reduction of the rebel threat with stories of federal success in terms of rebel weapons captured and rebels either killed or captured. Progress and therefore success was measured in quantitative terms, the ‘heroic’ Russian soldier slowly but surely sapping the strength of his ‘brutal’ adversary in a succession of ‘clearing’ operations. The focus of the stories concerning the rebels themselves, began to pay more attention to rebels who purportedly turned themselves in, either as a result of alleged dissatisfaction at the why the war was being prosecuted by the rebel commands or because they wanted to return to ‘normal’ life. The war was gradually transformed by media from a ‘Big War’ to a ‘Small War’ or ‘Peacekeeping Mission’. In an April 2004 article in the state news agency *RIA Novosti* aptly illustrates the above point.

“Moscow has largely succeeded in reducing the war to a waning internecine conflict, changing the tactic of mass mopping up operations to pin point spetsnaz missions, liquidating or neutralising over 30 prominent field commanders (including Raduyev, Khattab, Barayev and Gelayev), and holding a successful constitutional referendum and presidential elections there.”

‘Normality’ forms the final part of my discussion on the framing of this conflict. Symbols of ‘normality’ are often evoked by the State media, these symbols include such themes and events as; the opening of schools and hospitals, the return of refugees from the camps, elections, stories of reconstruction of housing and economic/transport infrastructure, news of troop reductions and withdrawal. These stories are designed to create the impression of an end to combat and the process of peace and restoration beginning.

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Responses and Reactions to Media and CM Communications.

In spite of the clampdown on the media, there has been very little public reaction to the move by the authorities. A variety of reasons and circumstances can account for this almost nonexistent reaction to the threat of freedom of the press. One such reason is the public’s trust in public institutions. In a recent poll conducted by ROMIR, 1500 Russians were asked several questions including: “what public institutions do you trust the most?” 50% said that they trust the President, 28% stated they do not trust anyone, 14% named the ROC, the government, army and media rated at 9% each. When asked “what source of information do you trust the most?” Central TV received 39%, central press 8%, central radio 7%, regional TV 4%, regional press 3.2%, regional radio 3% and the Internet 2%. A third question in the survey enquired “do you think censorship of the mass media is needed?” 41% believe that there must be censorship, 76% said that there needs to be some kind of censorship and only 19% stated that there should be no censorship in the mass media.35

The public’s image of the mass media has been coloured to an extent by events in the recent past. Mass media in the Soviet Union were used as a means to collectivise and motivate the people to achieving various objectives given by the authorities. The collapse of communism and the imposition of a market economy caught the media woefully unprepared and eventually forced them to seek financial support, which could not be met by the State. This call was answered by the business elite (the so-called oligarchs), who used their media assets to accumulate political capital. Conflict emerged between various financial empires that were competing for the spoils of the privatisation process and the mass media were at the forefront, engaging in black PR (kompromat) and representing the view of their owner. Eventually, the Russian public came to view the domestic media outlets as the puppets of their owners’.

There has been an increasing tendency for the government to threaten bringing in stringent legislation that would curb the mass media’s rights on reporting on crises. The proposed law is often passed through the State Duma and the Federation Council, but is vetoed by the President. During the lobbying and debates on the introduction of such legislation representatives of the mass media have on occasion been joining forces and petitioning Putin. Whether it is part of the government strategy or not, to put pressure on the mass media to bring them to the bargaining table, this has occurred. Mass media have been ‘voluntarily’ signing agreements on curbing their rights on reporting on crises. This may be done with the expectation that it is better to have some say in negotiating away rights and privileges rather than having no say if they are stripped away by the authorities.

Discussion on a voluntary ‘code of ethics’ during crises began in the wake of the October 2002 hostage taking crisis. Several suggestions for the creation of such a scheme came in early November 2002. Presidential Aide Sergei Yastrzhembsky called for journalists to develop an unwritten code of conduct for reporting in crisis situations. Irina Petrovskaya a TV critic from the newspaper Izvestia stated an “obvious need” to develop such, and having a system that is self-imposed rather than enforced by censors. The Russian Union of Journalists has also promoted this concept and had published documents containing recommendations for journalists. The newspaper Vremya MN also ran an article that discussed the issue of journalists introducing self-censorship following the October 2002 tragedy. Konstantin Ernst, General Director of ORT summed up his views on the matter and the reasoning given for the move.

“We made up our minds to introduce very strict self-censorship. The only thing that motivated our actions was the conviction that not a single report made by us should do any harm to the hostages and that all our actions should contribute to their release as soon as possible.”

In November 2002 the Press Ministry joined the fray when it released a list of 16 recommendations that covered issues ranging from the conditions under which terrorists may be interviewed to etiquette when dealing with victims and the families of victims. These recommendations were posted on the Ministry’s website. The Ministry described the document as a draft for discussion by the Media Industrial Committee (a group of media bosses formed in 2002 to act as a lobby group for the media industry). The move provoked some calls among the media community that the authorities were trying to impose a measure of censorship.\(^{38}\)

On the 8\(^{th}\) of April, 2003 the heads of Russia’s main media outlets signed an agreement on their right to report on crisis situations, such as the October 2002 hostage taking at the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow. The agreement was called the Anti-Terrorist Convention, its signing ceremony was attended by the Press and Information Minister Mikhail Lesin. Among the signatories to the agreement were; ORT (now TV 1), RTR, Interfax news agency and Ekho Moskvy radio station. Several of the key clauses of the agreement bans journalists from; interviewing ‘terrorists’, allowing ‘terrorists’ to go on air live without the prior permission of the authorities and acting in the role as a negotiator in a crisis situation. A segment of the agreement states that “during a terrorist action and an anti-terrorist action, people’s safety, human rights and the right to life take precedence over all other rights and liberties.”\(^{39}\)

In Moscow in late April 2004 the International Anti-Terrorism Media Forum was held. According to Alexander Orlov, the Information Advisor of the Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the focus of the forum was on the formation of a global information network to combat terrorism and drugs. “We should discuss the world


we live in, its development problems and the possibilities for the mass media to make it a better place.”

Further new media laws, relating to the reporting of crisis situations were discussed in early 2004. Although, in principal the Security Committee came out publicly against limiting information on terror attacks, there were some clear messages of expectation. Deputy Security Council Secretary, Valentin Sobolev made some strong statements.

“One of the main conditions of terrorism is active involvement of the media. The TV screen has become a battlefield for modern terrorism. Their target is to affect society so that it could issue an ultimatum to its leaders. A typical example is Nord Ost. Today the most popular and effective terrorist methods – violence not in regard to authorities, though this is taking place too, but against peaceful defenceless civilians, who have nothing to do with terrorist targets, and certainly the demonstration of the tragic consequences via the media.”

Conclusion.

It should be borne in mind that Russia is still in a transitionary form. The central power is still relatively weak, although the strength is slowly returning, the State is by no means safe from the influence of contradictory political and economic factors. Much of the affairs of State and national interests are minded by bureaucrats. However, these bureaucrats are relatively underpaid, inexperienced and sometimes lack the competence for work in the private sector. Those who possess the prerequisite educational and/or professional skills are ‘poached’ by private enterprise. This has resulted in staffing problems for the State, expressed especially in a recruiting campaign that sought to appeal to potential state sector employees by offering them a ‘chance’ to be personally involved in helping to recreate a strong Russia, rather than solely seeking financial or

personal gain. As a consequence of this, attempts to ‘manage’ a crisis have suffered from a mixture of inexperience, which is at times combined with overzealous bureaucrats.

The response and attitude of the authorities to the role of the mass media in society has not occurred in a vacuum, ‘recent’ events have had a significant influence on what is currently transpiring. During the break-up of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the new business class, the ‘infamous’ oligarchs, media were seen as a tool with which to collect political capital in an environment where there was little or no separation between the spheres of business and politics. A point which demonstrated the politicised nature of the media was clearly displayed in the Information War that resulted from a round of privatisation of State assets in the period of 1996-97. The fighting was bitter and very open, President Yeltsin also proved powerless to stop the conflict the oligarchs, who were fighting over the economic spoils. A side-effect of this conflict has been a growing public indifference and even the development of a negative public attitude toward privately owned media. In this instance, public attitude has manifested itself as either support for the government’s moves to introduce measures of censorship or disengagement/lack of interest in the plight of the private media (as indicated in various public polls that have been conducted on these issues).

Opinion polls that have been conducted during discussions on curbing the media’s rights on reporting on crises have showed some support for the authorities’ cause. In a November 2002 poll (of 1600 respondents by the Agency of Regional Political Research) that asked whether mass media coverage of emergency situations involving hostage taking should be censored; 61% said yes, 35% said no and 4% were undecided.42

The main justifications used by the authorities for limiting media coverage of crises are based upon ‘humanitarian’ and law/order concerns. During the April 2004 Media Forum Sobolev told the audience that the media should;

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• inform the population and avoid instigating panic
• to take it into consideration that the international community denies links between terrorism and any particular religion, race or nationality
• information reports should contain no information that could foster terrorists’ positions.43

The Director of the Club of Chief Editors of Russia’s Regional Newspapers, Victor Guschin told RIA Novosti in an interview that “information is a weapon that should never get into the hands of terrorists.” In the current environment of uncertainty as a result of acts of terrorism, the authorities are better able to institute measures of control without any public backlash. Toktasy Buzubaev, Deputy General Secretary of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation cited figures from a poll conducted in Russia in which; 81% of those polled were afraid of becoming victims of terrorism and only 7% were sure that they would not become victims of terrorism.44 The Kursk incident involved the use of sensitivity in dealing with the victims of the submarine disaster and their families as a means to restrict the latitude of media coverage. Terrorism has provided a greater justification by adding the dimension of national security. Mass media are being made more accountable for their actions in the reporting of crises, this accountability is directly to the authorities responsible for managing the crisis. Mechanisms of control and censorship are becoming more internalised and based upon a mixture of understood unwritten rules and legislation. Sanctions or penalties for breeching these ‘understandings’ will almost certainly be instituted in some form.

The current system of trying to control the flow of information in the mass media during the time of a crisis employs what could be considered in some circumstances to be relatively ‘Soviet’ objectives. However, it is clear that the means of bringing about these objectives are far removed from the old and outdated Soviet means of information management, with much more sophisticated means, borrowed from the West being employed. Naturally, government officials want to be seen publicly as being both

competent and in charge of matters. If they are not, a certain amount of public legitimacy and confidence in those officials is lost. It does not seem conceivable that the old Soviet system of censorship being revived. One of the means with which to hide censorship or at least not make it too obvious lies in how society functions. Russian society in most spheres of life is divided between the official and the unofficial worlds. The official world is made up of the public system, laws and management. An unofficial system exists alongside this ‘world’ where unwritten rules, cultural codes and ways of doing things occur. This unofficial system may not be strictly ‘legal’ or written down, but it is understood, which makes it harder to observe.
Bibliography.


