Civil Society in Russia: Bearing the Unbearable in the Name of the State

VLADIMIR VEDRASHKO

In the fall of 1999, Russia suffered a series of high-profile terrorist attacks. Two hundred ninety-three people died as a result of explosions in residential buildings in Buinaksk, Moscow, and Volgodonsk. These incidents served as a prologue to the second Chechen war, the death of thousands of people, public consolidation under the banner and rhetoric of a "fight against terrorism," and the subsequent process of what some call stabilization.

Today, few people still remember the 1999 terrorist attacks in Russia. At the same time, just as the world changed after September 11, 2001, it is fair to say that Russia changed after September 1999. It crossed an important and tragic threshold as Russian society was forced to recognize the extent of the terrorist threat to which it was exposed, a threat whose origins still remain unclear. In the meantime, it also found what it had long sought—the rule of an iron fist.

As society fell more and more under government control, not many Russians noticed the changes taking place—the curtailing of media freedoms, the gradual marginalization of the opposition, and the undermining of regional governors' authority, to name a few. Subtle transformations usually occur in the course of natural evolution. However, these changes were different: whereas evolution, in the traditional meaning of the term, signifies a movement forward, these "reforms" would take Russia back to a time in which civil society was a subject to the will of the state. Unfortunately, these changes are here to stay, and they are informing the future.

We can trace these transformations from the collapse of the Soviet Union up to the present day. In the 1990s, Russian society suffered through deep crises penetrating all spheres of public life. The old political and economic values came crashing

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down, while the new victories were somehow too easily dismissed. Few realized that the success of democracy and the loss of Soviet socio-political habits were two sides of the same coin—freedom of choice or, rather, freedom from dictatorship.

Unfortunately, inexperienced politicians of the new, post-Soviet wave were unable to sustain an open and mutually rewarding dialogue with society, either coming to arbitrary decisions or failing to explain their actions to the public. Grigory Pomerants, a renowned Russian philosopher and historian, recognized this lack of public participation in decision-making processes when he wrote, "Most of all, we need a culture of dialogue. Any issue must be discussed in a dialogue among equals who are capable of hearing each other's point of view."[1] Such was an opinion of one a learned academic, but politicians remained mute to it; they had no time to speak with the public. An attempt to have the president and other political leaders participate in popular television programs failed as soon as the idea was born. Both the prospective participants and the media found plenty of other crucial topics to pursue—communication with the public just happened to be absent from that list.

In short, as many other examples reveal, the culture of civic dialogue failed even before it could be introduced. As a result, power continued to slip out of the traditionally weak public control in a gradual but definitive manner. Unable to change or influence the situation, the Russian people grew accustomed to the war in the North Caucasus, the high-profile murders of businessmen and politicians (committed with impunity), an unstable banking system, and the lack of any credible means for fighting corrupt bureaucrats. The society was moving further away from a government it did not trust, while the government gradually moved further away from a society it did not need.

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After Boris Yeltsin appointed a new prime minister, Vladimir Putin, in August 1999, the position of mutual distancing between the power elites and society began to shift. The new premier was immediately faced with the September terrorist attacks that stirred the stagnating social bog and brought society back into an alliance with the Kremlin. It appears that Putin, by his name alone, even if on the subconscious level, gave the people a sense of a new beginning, a new way.[2] The series of terrorist attacks led to the concentration of people's hopes on the young and energetic leader. Many of these people honestly wanted to help their government face terrorism, as well as other social evils, yet for some reason this social desire did not translate into concrete actions. Instead, society deferred to the power of the government, handing the new prime minister full

control over the country. What followed would mark the beginning of a new period associated with socio-political stabilization, a process that is taking place against the backdrop of a crackdown on the media, a bloody war in Chechnya, and the traditional manipulation of the truth by just about anyone.

THE PRELUDE

Catastrophes and coups in Russia have nothing to do with the stars, but in the past ten years they have become synonymous with phrases such as "August'91" and "August'98."[3] In August 1999, though, nothing terrible seemed to have happened, just the appointment of a new prime minister (Vladimir Putin) to replace the old one (Sergei Stepashin).[4] Consequently, as the month was coming to a close, the Russian public, having grown accustomed to the instability reigning in the North Caucasus and paying little attention to the news from the region, felt strangely at ease. The month, which many people associate with trouble, was almost over, and the country went on as it had before. The military campaign that started in Dagestan on August 7 raised no objections from the public, nor did it inspire any shift in the public consciousness. Although the press was already beginning to speak of "the first popular war since the Great Patriotic War" (an influential newspaper *Kommersant Daily* wrote that "for the first time in the last half-century, Russia can feel the taste of victory"[5]), nobody in the public thought to call the new war popular or victorious. At the same time, the military success in Dagestan gave the federal army a reason to get back into the Chechen business. With the public largely ignoring the new military campaign, it was left to the Soldiers' Mothers, an outspoken group of women whose sons had been called up for military service, to do the protesting as they tried to prevent the new draft.

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BLOODY AUGUST, BLOODY SEPTEMBER

On August 31, an explosion thundered through the center of Moscow, a few steps away from the Kremlin in the underground shopping mall at Manezhnaya Square. Of those caught in the blast, one person died and 40 were left severely injured. This was the first warning.

Each person remembers the atmosphere following the Moscow explosion differently. Only the official response by government representatives is invariable

and written in stone. When asked whether or not new security measures would be introduced in Moscow, the head of the Federal Security Services (FSB) Nikolai Patrushev replied, "There is no cause for that. Explosions happen every day."[6]

Again, the terrorist attack and the official reaction to it stirred no public protest, no uproar from any non-governmental organizations. Needless to say, when similar attacks take place in Spain, for example, thousands of people take to the streets protesting the acts of the Basque separatists. The society stands tall and voices its protest. Yet in Russia, the public is virtually silent. Apparently, this society is used to terrorist attacks—that is the norm here, both for the people on the streets and for state officials.

The Russian population is large enough to have one big group marching under the president's flag and, at the same time, another one taking up actions of "civil disobedience," which in the Russian context amount to blanket indifference.

On September 4, a few days after the Moscow explosion, a residential building in the city of Buinaksk (Dagestan) was leveled to the ground, leaving 58 people dead. Again, it had no effect on the Russian public. Popular thinking went along the lines of "oh, well, it's a conflict zone, anything can happen." Everything was still within the norm. Unfortunately, the limits of how far that norm could be stretched continued to grow.

On September 9, another residential building blew up in Moscow in the Pechatniki district, killing 94 people. The next day, the recently appointed Prime Minister Putin flew to New Zealand for an international forum, as if confirming that nothing extraordinary had happened. Everything still fell within the norm. As Patrushev had said earlier, "explosions happen every day."

As if confirming the general's statement, on September 13, the day of mourning for the victims of the Pechatniki tragedy, a new explosion destroyed a residential building on the Kashirskoe Road in Moscow, killing 124 people.

Traditionally, the days of funerals and/or mourning following a terrorist attack are considered especially popular for repeat strikes. It is unlikely that this piece of general knowledge escaped the FSB, which somehow managed to take no preemptive action. On September 21, an influential weekly *Itogi* wrote:

> Prior to the explosion on the Kashirskoe Road, the authorities did nothing outside their routine responsibilities. Obviously, they followed all of the formalities, initiating criminal proceedings and starting the investigation. In a word, there was nothing extraordinary or unexpected. Accordingly, the public reacted to the usual passivity of the authorities with a habitual indolence.[7]

Let us imagine for a moment that two New York City apartment buildings

were blown up within an interval of several days. Can an American envision a scenario even before September 11 in which the authorities would do nothing outside their routine responsibilities following the first explosion? Can an American picture a society that would react with a habitual indolence to the usual passivity of the authorities? Would an American not wonder who was responsible for these acts and why they could not have been prevented? Would the American government not react by reassuring the public of its efforts to protect the country from a future attack?

These questions and their presupposed answers should point to the unique nature of a Russian society that defies the traditional understanding of humanity and the value of human life. It is possible, of course, to discuss the nature of the Russian state, but government is only a part of society as a whole; the conduct of officials is inherently sanctioned, whether consciously or subconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, by society. Therefore, this discussion is not about the nature of the state, but about the nature of society in Russia.

"STABILIZATION"

Following the September 1999 tragedies in Moscow, the nature of the relationship between the state and society changed dramatically. As *Itogi* wrote, "people were lost and frightened, and the authorities realized that the old means of dealing with the situation were not enough. The state's immediate response was to make sure the public was receiving the 'right' media coverage intended to maintain popular hopes in the success of the anti-terrorism campaign."[8]

Collectively, these explosions marked the limits of public tolerance for such acts of violence. At the same time, the means by which Russian society chose to fight terrorism fell short of public debates, popular demonstrations, or other methods long employed in democracies whereby the population voices its concerns, opinions, and desires. In Russia, the society remained passive; it ran and sought shelter under the state banner, ultimately allowing the perpetrators, whoever they were and whichever uniform they wore, to prolong the war in the North Caucasus as the Kremlin tightened its grip on the country as a whole. The perpetrators' victory and the public's allegiance to the Kremlin were further consolidated when another residential building was blown up on September 16 in the city of Volgodonsk (in the south of Russia), leaving 17 people dead and more than 70 wounded.

On September 15, the Interfax news agency filed a report similar to what can be seen nowadays in the United States. It said:

> On Tuesday in a closed session of the State Duma, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin not only secured the support of parliament members, but also

> received a virtual carte blanche for introducing tough measures with respect to the Chechen Republic—the hotbed for guerillas in Dagestan and the alleged terrorists responsible for the bombing of residential buildings in both Buinaksk and Moscow.[9]

The Interfax report went on to point out that in his closing remarks, Putin responded to the accusations that the government and state security apparatus waited to act and to take preemptive measures with respect to the threat of terrorism. According to the prime minister, "Decisive actions were not possible because of the lack of support of all political forces. Now, there is a greater certainty that the legislative branch is willing to share with the executive power the full responsibility for what is taking place in the North Caucasus."[10]

A short commentary is needed here. In the context provided above, "now" apparently means "following a series of high-profile explosions." In other words, the Russian executive and legislative branches decided on the shared responsibility for the conflict in the North Caucasus (the alleged hotbed for the alleged terrorists) only after the devastating terrorist acts. Somehow, that desire to accept responsibility did not come up before. And again, what is interesting here is not the cynical and cowardly position of the authorities, but the public's complete lack of understanding of that cynicism and cowardice.

The Interfax reporter, Natalia Timakova, argues further that Putin's speech opened the door for the military and security ministries "to use force irrespective of the views of their civilian commanders and in any manner they deem necessary."[11]

This was a very realistic prognosis. A few months later, the federal forces were bombing Grozny. Meanwhile, Sergei Shoigu, the Minister of Emergency Situations, in the midst of planning the evacuation of civilians from the besieged Chechen capital, urged the military to carry out the operation in the most humane manner possible. Such a dynamic in civilian-military relations illustrates the arbitrary nature of the power the Russian military enjoys: in any normal circumstances, it would be obliged to obey orders of the central command, but in Russia, the state minister responsible for protecting civilian lives in emergency situations has to request an appointment and negotiate with the generals. In this particular case, the negotiations—with thousands of civilian lives at stake—were underscored by the mutual understanding that the military operation would naturally lead to a catastrophe no matter what anyone did.

At the same time, the statement that the military is free to use force "in any manner it deems necessary" is not just a nicely constructed phrase. After all, what forms and affects public opinion are not mere facts, but the manner in which those facts are presented. The carte blanche given to the military is but one example of the policies defining Putin's "stabilization" plan.

The Interfax report ended on a positive note. It said, "We can only hope

that the authorities, united at last in the struggle against the common enemy, possess the will and the capacity to destroy the perpetrators."[12]

Millions of people were following the news those days, especially reports filed by influential agencies such as Interfax. In this atmosphere, the commentator's personal hopes stood as a reflection of the sentiments shared by millions of Russian citizens, even those who would hardly move a finger to change the situation themselves. This is important to understand when referring to the media coverage during this period. Hardly any reports, regardless of what they covered—economics or crime, military operations or statistics—were void of controversy. For instance, when the authorities arrested an alleged terrorist, they often refused to disclose his name—"in the interests of the investigation"—and the media did not press any further. Fairly soon, nobody could remember anything about this particular detainee; there were many new arrests made, and the new names were also kept secret with the same rationale provided as an excuse. The media played along. And even the reports that were credible did little, if anything, to incite a popular and active response from the public. As a result, much of the coverage reinforced the apathy already inherent in society.

UNDER THE VEIL OF ANTI-TERRORIST CAMPAIGN

A few days after the explosion in Volgodonsk, a strange sequence of events took place in Ryazan (city to the south of Moscow). According to a news broadcast by the NTV television network, late at night on September 23, residents in one of the apartment buildings in Ryazan discovered suspicious sacks with explosives stored in the house. The building was evacuated, the press claiming that it was meant to be another target and that the sacks contained a highly explosive material, hexogen.

A day later, the head of the FSB declared in a televised address that "the episode in Ryazan," as he dubbed it, was in fact meant to be a part of training. That same day, an official FSB spokesman apologized to the city residents for the psychological trauma caused by the operation intended to test the readiness of the local security authorities to counter terrorist activity.

The opposition is virtually nonexistent in Russia, its leaders having been successfully marginalized or appointed to some important government positions somewhere in the regions well removed from the center of activity.

The FSB apology sounded strange and was hardly sufficient to eliminate the confusion among the public as to who would plan such a training and for what reason. At the same time, the authorities downplayed these events, portray-

ing them as an example of openness and transparency in the battle against terrorism. Meanwhile, the generals responsible for running this battle sneaked around behind the backs of anonymous bureaucrats as the conflict in the North Caucasus slowly turned into a protracted tactical war. Paradoxically, the popularity of the Kremlin and the new prime minister skyrocketed.

In November 1999, Vitaly Portnikov, a journalist writing for the Moscow-based newspaper *Vedomosti*, characterized what he saw happening and outlined Russia's immediate future:

> This will be a state, in which the government draws authority not from the enthusiasm of the active members of the society, but from the secret services and the army elites, the same people who stood behind all of the political processes of the past 10 years. [...] The federal authorities will claim as much power and influence—at the expense of regional actors—as they will deem necessary; for the time being, separatism will lose its historic applicability.
>
> No freedom of speech will exist in this state. On the outside, everything will appear normal: the non-governmental publications and television networks, access to the Internet... But the reports on the president's speeches will all sound alike, even online. The West will, of course, continue to funnel much funding to support Russian democracy and human rights organizations, which in turn will produce small print runs of their bulletins so as to appease the Western donors. [...]
>
> The majority of the population will care little for all of this. Ordinary people will think they are building a strong Russia ready to combat terrorism, corruption, and economic crisis. With all of this taking place, Vladimir Putin will be easily reelected to a second presidential term.[13]

In today's Russia, it seems, very few people still wonder as to the route the country has taken—nobody bothers to have any doubts nowadays, instead choosing commonality and single-mindedness. At the same time, the federal government has proven incapable of tackling the most acute economic problems (e.g., small and medium businesses still find themselves on the sidelines of the economy) and has failed to keep its own promises. The state has been unable to guarantee and protect the rule of law. In the northern parts of the country and in the Far East, thousands of people suffer through winters with very little fuel to heat their homes. Journalists' rights are constantly violated, with the outside corporate interests getting in the way. The political regime, having first con-

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structed the so-called "vertical of power," is now in the process of erecting the "horizontal" society-based line, a pedestal made out of non-governmental organizations on top of which the state is to rest.

In November 2001, President Putin initiated the so-called Civic Forum in Moscow, a gathering of 5,000 NGO activists from various regions (although the absolute majority of participants still came from the capital and several other large cities). The Forum's goal was formulated as a "two-day dialogue with the state" in an attempt to see how the NGOs can work together with the federal and local governments in building a new, democratic Russia.

By the way, the dead in Chechnya number 5,000, or perhaps twice as much. It all depends on who does the counting.

Even before the Forum met, it had already caused a rift in the NGO and human rights community: the opposition activists could not decide whether to participate in the state-sanctioned gathering or not. In the end, many large, influential organizations elected to play along with the state, which did little to salvage the dialogue. Aleksandr Nikitin, the head of the Saratov-based human rights center Solidarity, described an episode he witnessed at the Forum: a man—an invalid—seated on the balcony, desperately screaming, addressed the entire gathering, "If you would like to speak about civil dignity of society, why don't you start with us?! Why have you put us on the balcony? I haven't been able to work either of these two days, I cannot take part in small group discussions, cannot even access the bathroom, get food, mount this platform, for God's sake!"[14]

The gap between the Russian public and the Russian state is striking. And yet, as long as the Kremlin can point to a popular base of support, it should be safe. The Russian population is large enough to have one big group marching under the president's flag and, at the same time, another one taking up actions of "civil disobedience," which in the Russian context amount to blanket indifference. As of today, the state has been very effective in consolidating power: newspapers, journals, radio, and TV leave little space for voices of criticism and opposition. Granted, of course, is that the opposition is virtually nonexistent in Russia, its leaders having been successfully marginalized or appointed to some important government positions somewhere in the regions well removed from the center of activity.

It does not even make sense to refer to statistics here: statistical analyses almost always consist of discrepancies even on such critical issues as the number of casualties in the North Caucasus. The figures here are very controversial, and they differ by the count of thousands. The size of the Chechen forces also varies in different reports—from "the remaining several hundred bandits" to 10,000-12,000

fighters. As the Deputy Russian Prosecutor General in charge of the Southern Federal District, Sergei Fridinsky, said on February 13, 2002, the Chechen forces number "more than ten fighters, and even more than a thousand..."[15]

Somebody is making a fool out of us all, and this dynamic has become so well integrated into every-day life in Russia that it has acquired a stabilizing quality. It is useful to remember here that the Soviet monolith rested on very similar state-forged lies. At the same time, the USSR was the most stable state of all. It just happened to collapse one day.

The same fate awaits Putin's Russia. But until then, the state will continue to grow in strength, having subjugated the society before the latter had a chance to learn to control the state. It seems that the coming stability will be welcomed by all—those in the West, those in the East, and the majority of those inside the country itself.

And what about the minority? What about that invalid screaming at the top of his lungs, what about the parents of those soldiers doomed to die in Chechnya? And, by the way, the dead number 5,000, or perhaps twice as much, it all depends on who does the counting. Who will remember that those fighting against the Russian federal forces in Chechnya happen to be Russian citizens, it's just that they have a different, separatist, ideology?

Russia has yet to learn and recognize the value of an individual human life.

What is a constant in all of this is that Russia has yet to learn and recognize the value of an individual human life. Which means, in turn, that this discrepancy—plus or minus several thousands of lives—can serve as a good, adequate resting base for the new regime. After all, Russia has seen discrepancies of a larger extent—those were measured by thousands and even millions of lives. Tragically, that remains in the genetic memory of the society as one of its historic traits and social skills: to bear the unbearable in the name of the state. ■

NOTES

1 Grigory Pomerants, "Most of All, We Need the Culture of Dialogue," *The Human Rights Defender* (3-1997): 82, translated from the Russian.

2 The stem of Putin's last name, the word *put'*, means "way" in Russian.

3 In August 1991, a group of hard-line conspirators, including Vice President Gennady Yanayev, KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov, and other top Communist Party officials had formed a state emergency committee in a bid to seize power and control over the Soviet Union. The *putsch* failed after three days of unrest. In a separate development seven years later, in August 1998, the Russian government devalued the ruble, defaulted on its domestic debt, and declared a 90-day moratorium on foreign payments.

4 Prior to appointing Vladimir Putin to the post of the prime minister, President Yeltsin sacked four prime ministers in 18 months. Putin's predecessor, Sergei Stepashin, was fired from the post three months into the assignment, and everyone was asking "why?" Journalist Ilya Bulavinov analyzed the situation in *Kommersant Daily:* "The man who was considered Yeltsin's official successor and whose popularity had just begun to climb suddenly grew scared of the war. He was simply confused. On the outside, the premier reacted to the war fairly adequately: on August 8, he flew in to Makhachkala [Dagestani capitol], called in an emergency meet-

ing, and issued orders... But he was clearly scared. He kept repeating, 'Most important is that the civilians and the military do not get caught in this.' In other word, he had no intentions of fighting a real war. And that decided his fate. The Kremlin figured out that Chechnya was its only chance to secure power long before its nemesis, the parliament, came to a similar conclusion. In addition to this internal power struggle, the population was calling for an 'iron fist.' And so this fist, belonging to the little known Colonel Putin, seized hold of Chechnya." Ilya Bulavinov, "The Taste of Victory," *Kommersant Daily,* December 28, 1999, 1-3, translated from the Russian.

5 Ibid.

6 See interview with Nikolai Patrushev, "Nikolai Patrushev: 'No Grounds to Suspect Dagestani Trace,'" *Nezavisimaya Gazeta,* <http://www.nns.ru/interv/arch/1999/09/02/int336.html> (September 2, 1999), translated from the Russian.

7 Aleksandr Ryklin, "The Second Front of the War in the Caucuses," *Itogi,* September 21, 1999, 173, translated from the Russian.

8 Ibid.

9 Natalia Timakova, "The Authorities are Ready to Fights Terrorists, but Can They Protect Ordinary Humans?" Interfax News Agency, <www.interfax.ru/freshnews/comment1909.htm> (September 17, 1999), translated from the Russian.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Vitaly Portnikov, "The State for Putin," Vedomosti, <www.vedomosti.ru/stories/1999/11/24-07-01.html> (November 24, 1999), translated from the Russian.

14 Aleksandr Nikitin, "The State Will Not Relinquish Any Positions without Pressure," *The Human Rights Defender,* <http://www.hro.org/editions/hrdef/401/0414.htm> (4-2001), translated from the Russian.

15 "Deputy Russian Prosecutor General Fridinsky: 'Thousands of Militants Still Fighting the Federal Forces in Chechnya,'" Interfax News Agency, February 13, 2002, translated from the Russian.

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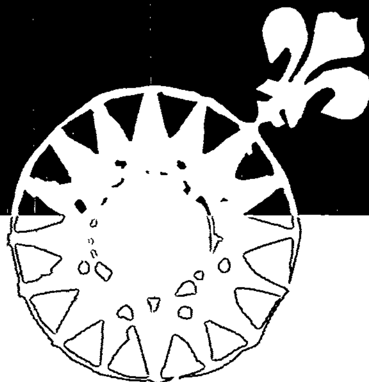

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Published twice a year in January and July for The Foreign Policy Institute, The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, The Johns Hopkins University. Volume 22 (2002).

Prepayment is required.
Annual subscriptions: $26.00, individuals; $67.00, institutions. **Foreign postage:** $7.00, Canada and Mexico; $7.50, outside North America. **Single-issue prices:** $16.00 individuals; $40.50, institutions. Payment must be drawn on a U.S. bank in U.S. dollars or made by international money order. **Sales tax:** Residents of MD 5% / DC 5.75% / PA 6%. For orders shipped to Canad[illegible] add 7% GST (#124004946RT).

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