

**25 September 2004:
Round Table "The Challenge of
Chechnya: Human Rights and
Regional Security" in Sofia, the
capital of Bulgaria, a former state
from the so-called Soviet block.
Bulgaria, which is only 3 years away
from the planned date
for EU accession in 2007
and currently chairing the OSCE.**

Irina NEDEVA

Oksana Chelysheva, a Russian human rights activist from the Russian Chechen Friendship Society reads the letter accompanying a drawing by 10-year-old Sergey from Russia to a Chechen boy: "Please, excuse my country Russia." The picture doesn't show any flowers, houses or people. It shows two soldiers with guns pointed at one another. "I study in the 81st School and I know that each day is a war for you," Sergey wrote on 19 August 2004. "We don't want to ever shoot at people," another Russian girl Natasha, 16, writes. The Friendship Society is collecting these messages. There is no trace of them in the official Russian media...

A friend of mine gives me a small album, something like a self-managed publication, printed in France in 1998: drawings by Chechen children. A house, streets and tanks, people with their hands and legs separated from the torso, burning windows, girls with their mothers drawn in a horizontal position, painted in red: probably the best way for a 6-year-old to draw a dead body. When it has seen it.

THE UN-IMAGINABLE WAR

We have no images from the war in Chechnya. The war in Iraq is a war of censored images (no footage has been shown of the coffins carrying back the bodies of American soldiers), the actions of "bombing" are being masked behind technical-style wordings like "striking objects with perfect precision," whereas the murdered are always only "neutralised rebels." The war in Chechnya is un-imaginable. Snapshots from Grozny are a rarity and we have not seen the faces of Chechen children, we need to browse our mind to find a picture of an ordinary town or village in the Chechen Republic. For the Bulgarian global news spectator and for the reader of the international section in the Bulgarian press, Chechnya is too far.

Except for the hostage tragedies from Nord-Ost and Beslan. Naturally, the imprints on our mind are of women in black, ready to kill (on the first school day my seven-year-old daughter asked me "Mum, what is shahid?") and black men belted with explosives. Terrorists. Those are doubtlessly terrorists, when we speak of helpless victims, of children and of a population turned into a scapegoat.

CHECH

THE EUROPEAN AN FOR THE VALUES

The question "Scapegoat for what?" is probably a part of the extremists' strategy. For religious or ideological fanatics, who are not afraid to pursue their goal at the cost of all means, this is probably the most flagrant manifestation of a terrorist "PR." So when they do something horrifying, the world would be shattered and ask itself what they are fighting for.

Psychologically, this is clear for everyone. What escapes the eye, shocked by the drama of the innocent, is the fact that the question "What are they doing it for?" is inconvenient for some. It is scary because it leads to other questions... Without implying an apology for extremism, it can start colouring the picture.

THE BLACK-AND-WHITE PICTURE OF WAR - "THE ENEMIES" AND "OUR OWN", "US" AND "THEM"

During the round table at the Sofia Sheraton Hotel, I was asking myself whether the humanitarian perspective of human rights is sufficient to defend the values dying first in any war such as "human life", "shame", "dialogue", "empathy", "negotiations" in the black-and-white propaganda image of a world of conflicting armies: those of the forcible governments, choosing deliberately the way of war against the army of religious or national fanaticism, which is not afraid to take children as hostages...

Human rights - of which human being? Of the human president Vladimir Putin, who either sends or doesn't send the federal special corps to raid the school or the theatre... Of the human Basayev, who takes the responsibility for the terrorist act... or the right to life of the slaughtered children, or of the suffocated theatre-goers, of all targeted and innocent victims of both terrorism and the war against terrorism...

THE VICTIMS OF WAR - THE VICTIMS OF PEACE TALKS

The common denominator seems to be the victims of war. They are always more than the victims of peace talks. The first group remains in the military statistics, and the second generates historically influential persons, such as Yitzhak Rabin - a classical victim of peace talks.

However, another minority in Russia is far from being so visible - the minority of the people in Russia, who object the war and the policy of the Kremlin. Three activists

CHECHNYA: A BULGARIAN TEST OF DEMOCRACY



Left to right: Aaron Rhodes, Executive Director of the IHF, Krassimir Kanev, Chair of the BHC, Dr. Lyubomir Ivanov, President of the Manfred Wörner Foundation

of the Russian Chechen Friendship Society have disappeared. They were classical dissidents in a state with a perceivable tradition of different thinking among the reasoning people. Which means also to assume a risk: to be followed by the special services, to issue a newspaper, to maintain an information site within a full information black-out... Not to be a part of the media propaganda, to gather data about crime, banditism, the abduction of people in Chechnya, to describe them in detail to try and provide legal assistance, to look for witnesses even when the victims do not want to testify, to try and look for the guilty ones in the confusion of war... You just follow the maxim that a difference has to be made between a Chechen and a Chechen terrorist, when these two concepts are so willingly, with the ease of propaganda, being confused in the mass media. And not only in Russia.

I am trying to understand whether the humanitarian perspective of human rights and the rational principles of democracy could convince the opponents of the political process in the need to make reasonable compromise for negotiating with legitimate authorities of the rebels.

"IN PERSONAL CAPACITY"

During the discussion, each of the statements made by Bulgarians started with the introduction: "My name is X, I work for Y and I speak in personal capacity." It was a self-evident fact for the genre of discussion. However, when emphasised, it signals a symptom of a problem. The organisers, the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the Manfred Wörner Foundation are nongovernmental organisations. There is no representative from the Bulgarian government on the agenda, and also the ambassadors of the United States and Russia are not around. Irrespective of his commitment to be a key speaker, Ivan Krastev fails to appear...

THE COLOUR BLINDNESS OF WAR

That war resembles colour blindness is clear. Reasoning in the categories of "the bad guys" and "the good guys" does not provide chances of discriminating between bad and worse, good and better.

Are Basayev and Maskhadov one and the same thing? What are the differences?

This is a question, which both Bulgarian and Russian media seem to disregard.

When we speak about "a political process", why don't we try and remind the meaning of policy: the essence of negotiating, of looking for compromise, to restrict damages... And if "a political process" means negotiations, whom are we talking to? Where do we end keeping the rule "we never negotiate with terrorists"? Doesn't that rule sign more and more often the death sentence of hostages? And if we abide by the rule that one living hostage because of negotiations is better than all of them dead, will it not be possible to reach a reasonable compromise?

In the course of the discussion, Ulrich Fischer, Vice President of the IHF, shared his personal reasons for dealing with Chechnya: "I have never seen a city like Grozny... Totally demolished. I have no problem calling a terrorist someone taking hostages and killing them. But I have a problem, when a whole nation is condemned as "terrorist", that's what's happening with the Chechens."

"Do you have to be Catholic or Jewish, so that the entire world recognises that your nation is a victim of genocide?", IHF Executive Director, Aaron Rhoads asked. And added, "Putin is taking the road of "the final solution" to the Chechen issue, similarly to Hitler's approach to the Jews. Whereas the double-standard reactions around the world to the policy of the Kremlin resemble the blindness of democracy in the non-recognition of the fascist threat in the 30s of the 20th century."

Ulrich Fischer: "There are fractions, financed by radical Saudi groups, for whom Chechnya is the softest part of Russia's belly, but this doesn't mean that if you're a Muslim, a traditionalist, professing Sufism, you are a threat, an enemy. In its philosophical essence, the mystical Sufism is pious and turned inwards, peaceful. Whereas, ⇨



ULRICH FISCHER

- Why is Chechnya of such key importance to you?

- Chechnya is an indication of the limitations of the Western lack of understanding for Russia. Russia believes that it is the only large state, which was never a colonial power. The problem is that other states recognised their colonialism and overcame it, whereas Russia does not even want to admit this. The

Chechen and the other Caucasian peoples have always been under Russian pressure: imperial, Stalinist, and now it's Russian federalism.

- What can you do as a nongovernmental organisation?

- Our governments, the European ones, including yours, are allowing Russia to do too much. They believe that they have to approve Russia's policy for economic reasons. Russia is the biggest exporter of energy: oil and gas. States have an interest in maintaining their relations with it, and, meanwhile, Vladimir Putin is turning into an authoritarian leader. His actions after the tragedy in Beslan have made Russia even less democratic. As human rights advocates, we would like to tell our governments directly that their silence on the events in

Russia and Caucasus is a serious mistake.

- Meanwhile, France, Germany and Spain are criticising the other forcible player: Bush in Iraq. Is this a double standard?

- There is logic with respect to their criticism of Bush. We asked these governments about their plans for the future. We heard only one answer: "Germany and France are not in Iraq." Russia receives vague or no criticism whatsoever. I agree that is a double standard.

- How do you perceive the tragedy in Beslan?

- I believe this is a disaster, a crisis of all humanitarian democratic methods. Beslan is the logical conclusion, which happens, when the legitimate power in a bubbling location is overridden. The individual Chechen terrorism is horrifying. No doubt, the style is similar to Al-Qaeda. However, Chechen rebels have to be distinguished from the "Basayev-style rebels".

- Do you believe that it is reasonable to have this conference in Bulgaria?

- Many people have to wake up, both here and in Western Europe, or otherwise we could be too late to recognise the birth of new authoritarianism... The media are important, the information, the facts, the overall picture, and not merely making sure that everyone is against Islam. Therefore, you are an important location!

⇒ today, being a Muslim in the Russian Federation may turn out to be a "sentence" of street violence, of special corps "alertness" ... This doesn't mean that no one of the Chechen extremists is closely related to Al-Qaeda. However, the fact that a terrorist professes Islam does not mean that 10 million Muslims in Russia are terrorists!"

During the debates at the conference, the time comes for the shame. "We, the human rights activists in Germany, Europe, in Bulgaria, are responsible for the war. Because we allow our governments to keep silent at the sight of Russia's forcible policy in the name of economic interests and the access to Russian petrol, which is guaranteed by the Kremlin. Whereas, the Russian policy towards Chechnya can only be compared to "fascism - only fascists and Nazis shoot without compromising with their political opponent." (Ulrich Fischer).

"When Putin treats under the same common denominator a terrorist like Basayev and the democratically elected president Maskhadov and his spokesperson Zakhayev, announcing one and the same bounty for their heads, this is propaganda in the name of war, because it destroys the chances of the political process. Thus, Russia is pushing the Caucasus towards a catastrophe. And if we do not exert pressure on our own European governments, so that they resist the imperial policy of the Kremlin, we are also responsible. If the swirl of the spiral of violence in Caucasus is a crime, and we know about it, because in-

formation reaches us about abrupt and illegal arrests, about the outrages of the federal forces, abductions, killings, if we don't object that, then we share in it." (Ulrich Fischer).

"One of the violated human rights," Lyubomir Ivanov, President of the Manfred Wörner Foundation, said, "the right to self-determination, is given a definition clear enough in the UN Human Rights Charter. The problems in Northern Ireland, the Palestine, Kosovo, and even the forgotten example of one of the Swiss cantons, show that everywhere the fight for this right leads to decades of violence and terrorism. And everywhere it ends by the need to accept, at a certain time, that the nation, who was our number 1 enemy, turns into a neighbouring state, with which we establish friendly relations. If this is inevitable, why the victims then? Why all that time?"

THE DEBATE

Dr. Zhelyo Zhelev, former President of Bulgaria and special attorney of the OSCE Chair Solomon Pasi for the Caucasus and Southern Ossetia: "The problem can be solved in a political manner rather than only by force. I suggested a Caucasian Political Club similar to the Balkan one. And talks are necessary."

Georgi Koritarov, journalist, New Europe Radio: "The Bulgarian media demonstrate a deficit in relation to the entire picture. With little exceptions, they are unable to make ⇒

⇒ the difference... For instance, the news about the Qatar trial against the Russian services that killed former president Yandarbiyev received practically no attention."

Four reactions to the issue: Bush and Putin - friends in the common cause of pressure and not of political decisions.

Iliya Nalbantov, Ministry of Defence, in his personal capacity: "The war crimes of the US army in Abu Graib and those of the Russian federal forces in the Caucasus are similar. The former Soviet block will take a long time to deal with the waste product of national states: the non-reformed armed forces... Dudayev and Basayev are a product of the Soviet system."

Ulrich Fischer: "Unlike Russia, in the United States there is civil control over the army. The evidence of this are the instigated public processes and publicity. This is lacking in Russia."

Georgi Koritarov: "The war between a particular political regime and one president need not be attributed to the Russian people, which has a potential for peace."

Vassil Sotirov, journalist from *24 Chassa* daily: "Against the backdrop of the politicians' helplessness, there is a need to readjust the values with the assistance of international human rights organisations, which could probably provide their contacts and their potential for understanding and negotiations to the benefit of the political process.

Thus the conflict and the solution could be regarded from a new perspective."

Oksana Chelysheva, Russian Chechen Friendship Society: "Irrespective that officially the operations are not regarded as cleansing, an attempt for the final forceful decision of the Chechen issue is underway... The opinion inside Russia is already giving signs of change: there is compassion for the human thesis. However, the attitude to the Muslims will be an issue to come..."

The questions that hanged in the air:

- What is the result of destroying the potential for talks?

- Could a gathering in the capital of a European state such as Bulgaria (which is chairing the OSCE) be a chance for a step in the direction of internationalising the Chechen issue?

- If Europe has information about the crimes in Caucasus, does not it join in the responsibility for the genocide there?

- Does Europe support Moscow's request for the extradition of the political Chechen emigrants or will this be an abdication from the values of European democracy?

- If Chechnya turns into a part of the actual debate on the values of democracy in Europe, will the Bulgarian public opinion, the Bulgarian political elite, betray Bulgaria as a state of pro forma democracy? ■



OKSANA CHELYSHEVA

The Russian Chechen Friendship Society was established in 2000. We wanted to overcome the animosity and the fear between Chechens and Russians, which resulted from the terror. The Society was established by Stanislav Dimitrievski, an archaeologist, now working as a journalist. He

was a witness of the events in Grozny in 1995 during the operations of the Russian army. The idea is to present more information to the stressed and manipulated Russian society about the facts in the Caucasus.

- As journalists, do you have problems with the Russian authorities?

- Three people from the Society are missing. Of course, this is related to our work in the Caucasus. Many of our correspondents have been arrested systematically, or even abducted. Sometimes we manage to obtain their release even with the assistance of international organisations. In Russia we are being followed by the Ministry of Interior, the special services, the Ministry of Information.

- What happened after you established contact with Maskhadov's people, on 1 September, when the hostage tragedy in Beslan unfolded?

- We were looking to attain the best. I called

Akhmadov the very first day. I left my contact details, he called later and promised to speak to Maskhadov. They were on the side of the children. We published the interview, which was made directly over the phone from America. This was the first open expression of Maskhadov and Zakhayev's willingness to stop the terrorists with their authority as legitimate leaders of the Chechens, fighting for independence. Maskhadov wanted to go to Beslan and negotiate with the terrorists, but he needed guarantees for his personal security. An hour after his statement, the school was stormed.

- Do you believe that Maskhadov's willingness to intervene resulted in the storming of the school?

- It is difficult to say. I don't know all the details. But it is more than a mere coincidence: his willingness to act and the beginning of the end. Thereby, we insist on the full and public investigation of the circumstances and of the operation by international structures, rather than only Russian ones.

- Do the Russian media reprint the interviews you make?

- No, not a single one. Generally, we have friends in the Russian mass media, we send them information, they check it, we exchange information with *Moskovskiyev novosti*, *Izvestiya*, *Novaya gazeta*. However, such interviews are a taboo in the Russian mass media.