

Czech Reflections on the Chechen Conflict

From Morality to Mainstream?

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World opinion sees Chechnya as a case of Islamic terrorism, but Czech elites have persistently condemned Russia's human rights violations there.

CZECH society has taken notice of the ongoing conflict in the far-away, little-known North Caucasus republic of Chechnya since it first sparked to life thirteen years ago. Because the conflict began soon after Czechoslovakia gained independence after more than forty years of Soviet domination, Czech attitudes have not been impartial. Unavoidably, the Czech perspective has been influenced by currents of popular opinion established in the 1980s and 1990s and reflecting how Russia and Russians were viewed. Czechs saw the Russo-Chechen wars, at least the first one, through the prism of their own past and therefore supported the Chechen struggle for independence from Moscow.

Public and media discussion of the Chechen situation has been shaped by a loosely divided elite. Intellectuals and opinion leaders associated with former president Václav Havel have unceasingly tried to bring national and international public attention to the Chechen conflict, and especially to the many violations of human rights. Their views tend to be opposed by leftists and pragmatists. Several geopolitical variables have influenced Czech social discourse about Chechnya, including changes in U.S. policy toward Russia following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the new paradigm of the war against terrorism, in which Russia is considered an ally, and Moscow's decision to brand the Chechen rebels as "terrorists." Many Western media outlets also shifted their tone after 9/11. As will be argued below, the Czech position on the Chechen conflict continues to show particularities even today, although it is now much closer than formerly to Western mainstream perceptions.

Czech attitudes toward the Chechen conflict have not

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formed in a vacuum, but are part of the broader development of Czech-Russian relations. Bilateral ties with Russia were difficult in the 1990s, because of Moscow's opposition to the country's accession to NATO. Relations began to normalize in the early 2000s, but turned tense again in 2007 when Washington announced plans to build a missile defense radar facility not far from Prague. The Russian government's sharp statements of disapproval have invoked images of a new cold war in Europe and an "inevitable arms race."¹ Should relations with Russia deteriorate, the conflict in the North Caucasus could again play a role in Czech political and social discourse as a part of a "rhetorical campaign" to undermine Russia's proclaimed commitment to peace and respect for international law.

All Eyes on Chechnya

The reaction of the West to the first Chechen war (1994–96) was erratic, varying between tacit approval of Russia during the initial phase of the war and criticism in 1995–96. Chechnya presents the West with the traditional dilemma of not wanting to endanger relations with Russia by criticizing its actions. Characteristically, during the first months of the war, NATO Secretary General Willy Claes and U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry described the Chechen war as Russia's "internal affair" and exhibited little willingness to meddle.² Western strategists justified their silence by arguing that criticism of Russian policy in Chechnya would play into the hands of President Boris Yeltsin's opponents.³

The implicit license given the Kremlin to settle its "internal affair" soon expired, however. The scenes of burning Chechen cities and villages and of civilian casualties that were regularly broadcast on international—*not to mention Russian*—television necessarily influenced public opinion in the West and forced its governments to protest ever more emphatically against the obvious human rights violations. Discussion of Russia's membership in the Council of Europe was suspended in February 1995, in part because of allegations related to Chechnya. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was critical to the point of being undiplomatic. In its March 1996 report, for example, the OSCE described the Russian offensive in western Chechnya as "aimed directly against the civilian population" and denounced its tactics as "terror against the civilian population" rather than an effort to suppress an insurgency.⁴ The Chechen resistance was primarily understood as a national liberation movement, an image widely propagated by Moscow's



Former president of the Czech Republic Václav Havel considers Chechnya an issue of human rights and self-determination, not Islamic terrorism. (AP Photo/ČTK, Marta Myskova)

disastrous media policy during the first Chechen campaign and the propaganda and media savvy of its Caucasian adversaries.

The beginning of the second Chechen campaign in the autumn of 1999 and the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington two years later introduced a number of new, emotionally charged terms and concepts into the Russian political vocabulary, later to be picked up in the United States and worldwide. The new approach had crystallized by September 1999. Following a string of lethal terrorist attacks in the cities of Moscow, Volgograd, and Buinaksk, Russia began to describe itself as the target of a global Islamist front waging war against Western (Christian or Judeo-Christian) civilization and its values.⁵ The presence of a common arch-enemy, so it was claimed, would unite Russia and the West. By making Chechen separatism an element in a "worldwide jihad," Moscow intended, at the very least, to obtain *carte blanche* for a definitive settling of scores with the Chechen resistance.

During the first years of the Chechen conflict, Western governments and citizens repeatedly condemned Russia's systematic violations of human rights and stressed the need to differentiate terrorists and civilians. The Western criticism of Russia in the context of the new, accelerating Chechen campaign reached a climax at the OSCE Istanbul Summit in November 1999. By this point, in the autumn of 1999 and the subsequent winter of 1999–2000, the Western public had been shocked by the massive artillery and aerial strikes against Grozny and other cities. These actions were supposed to lay the groundwork for the Russian occupation of the capital, but they also resulted in the deaths of thousands of Chechen civilians. Some of the harshest criticism at that time came from the United States. In February 2000, George W. Bush, then the governor of Texas and a presidential candidate, even proposed imposing economic sanctions against Russia “until they understand they need to resolve the dispute peacefully and not be bombing women and children and causing huge numbers of refugees to flee Chechnya.”⁶ Chancellor Gerhard Schröder of Germany, who in the next few years would establish a close friendship with President Vladimir Putin, was pressured by German public opinion into talking about a “war against an entire nation” and “indiscriminate attacks against the civilian population.”⁷

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led the Bush administration to frame international security policy in the context of a global “war on terror” in which the United States assumed a key role. The U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and later in Iraq, and growing difficulties in mobilizing international support, softened Washington's approach to its new-found ally, the Russian Federation. The United States, like Russia, now began to see the Chechen insurgents as terrorists. The attacks inside Russia by the Chechen resistance and its sympathizers since 9/11 also played a role, contributing to the ideological and political transformation of the Chechen resistance from ethno-nationalism to religious extremism, as did the global spread of Islamophobia. The fighters for national liberation and self-determination so admired just a few years earlier were now transformed into “Islamist” terrorists attacking Western values or interests around the world. The most obvious change took place in the vocabulary of the Western media.⁸

Chechnya Through Czech Eyes

Czech discourse on Chechnya has gone through several phases since the early 1990s. A thorough analysis of news

media coverage of the conflict and of the opinions presented by all of the currents of societal discussion of the conflict would go far beyond the scope of this essay, so the treatment here will be limited to some key reflections.

From the beginning, Czech society has not considered the Chechen conflict to be a pressing international issue, and public discussion of the conflict has not aroused much emotion or the kinds of ideological differences that might lead to mass social activism. The conflict seemed of interest to the news media and the government mainly after the outbreak of the first and second wars, and later after the seizures of the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow (2002) and the school in Beslan, North Ossetia (2004), high-profile terrorist actions that attracted worldwide public attention.

When the Chechen conflict began, Czech society had just recently thrown off the yoke of communism, leaving a majority consensus for a pro-Western orientation that would eventually lead to membership in NATO and the European Union. Not surprisingly in light of this, most Czechs viewed the first Chechen conflict as a legitimate struggle of the Chechens for national self-determination and as a natural continuation of the breakup of the former Soviet Union/communist empire, which the Kremlin sought to halt at any cost. Hiding behind these somewhat oversimplified reactions was probably a residual continuation of the bipolar worldview of the cold war, but now with the polarity switched.⁹ The last Russian troops finally left Czech territory in 1991,¹⁰ and the Czech Republic, unlike some of the former Soviet republics, had not yet experienced any negative consequences from its dependency on imported gas and oil from Russia (in 2005, Gazprom-delivered natural gas covered approximately 79 percent of Czech demand). Finally, aside from the suppression of the Prague Spring by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968, there were no major differences between the two countries on the interpretation of history. Moreover, during his 2006 visit to Prague, President Putin apologized and admitted Russia's moral culpability for the occupation of Czechoslovakia thirty-eight years earlier.

As international reactions and views on the Chechen rebel movement evolved, the insurgents gradually lost a great deal of the tacit support that Czech society had offered—partly because of the actual inclination of some elements of the Chechen resistance toward radical Islamism, and partly because of Russia's consistent depiction of its intervention since 1999 as an anti-terrorist operation. The geographical projection of the North Caucasus as a battleground in the struggle between Western civilization and Islamist terror now became entwined

with Islamophobia. While this sea change has not taken root firmly in the Czech environment, it is nonetheless quite apparent in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in recent years against European and U.S. targets and the successful spread of the interpretation of today's world order as a clash of civilizations. With the loss of a clear value differentiation identifying a "good" side and a "bad" side in the conflict, there was a society-wide decline in pressing the issue. The horrified reaction to the events in Beslan, where hundreds of children were killed, was a striking exception.

Key Players and Currents of Opinion. Czech social and political discourse on the Chechen war reflects the significant differences on the issue among the nation's elite. Since the public at large is not deeply interested in the subject, the elite have become the main source of opinion. The leading critics of Russian policy in Chechnya, especially regarding human rights, are former president Václav Havel, the non-governmental organization People in Need (*Člověk v tísni*), the daily newspaper *Lidové noviny*, and the weekly *Respekt*. Many of the journalists and human rights advocates associated with Havel have had their own experiences with events in Chechnya and understand how complex the situation is. They have therefore held back from expressing overt support for the Chechen rebels and have concentrated instead on human rights violations—mostly, but not exclusively, by the Russians. They speak of the cycle of violence and crime unleashed, although not exclusively perpetrated, by Russian security forces. This group also includes people who at least to some extent sympathize with the secular elements of the Chechen resistance (e.g., circles other than those around the former Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov). These conservative currents have focused on criticizing Russian domestic and foreign policy, protesting the "appeasement" of Moscow by the West. This group includes the writers associated with the magazine *Střední Evropa* and members of the Civic Institute (*Občanský institut*).

Those on the other side of the debate over Chechnya are mostly communists and other opponents of Havel or of the United States who have spoken out against what they see as uncritical support—or even propaganda—for America's worldwide imperialism. These groups regard Havel and the human rights advocates around him as abetting U.S. imperialism. Three factors have played a determining role in this stance: residual Russophile (although the admiration of all things Russian varied throughout the communist era), support for the Russian government as a possible barrier to the spread of U.S. influence (despite



Foreign Minister of Chechnya Ilyas Akhmadov during his press conference in the headquarters of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Prague on November 15, 1999. Czech state institutions largely ignored Akhmadov's visit. (AP Photo/Michal Krumphanzl/ČTK)

the ideological gulf between hard-line Czech communists and Russia's fragile democracy in the 1990s or Putin's subsequent pragmatism), and opposition to Havel.

It should be added, however, that the criticism of Havel and People in Need by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia is chiefly motivated by their worldwide activism in the area of human rights, which the communists denounce as conveniently selective and aimed primarily at Fidel Castro's communist regime in Cuba. For example, the Communist Party's daily paper *Haló noviny*, denounced the People in Need organization as "the toady of the former ruler [Havel]"¹¹ in connection with its campaign for the observance of human rights on the "Island of Freedom." Havel is also a thorn in the flesh of the communists because of his criticism of them on the domestic

End the Silence over Chechnya

The following is an open letter from former president of the Czech Republic Václav Havel, French philosopher André Glucksmann, Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, former president of South Africa F.W. de Klerk, former president of Ireland and UN Human Rights commissioner Mary Robinson, president of the Nippon Foundation Yohei Sasakawa, foreign minister of the Czech Republic Karel Schwarzenberg, founder of the Open Society Institute George Soros, and Nobel laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

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It is extremely difficult for an honest observer to break through the closed doors that separate Chechnya from the rest of the world. Indeed, no one even knows how many civilian casualties there have been in ten years of war.

According to estimates by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the figure is between 100,000 (that is, one civilian out of ten) and 300,000 (one out of four). How many voters participated in last November's elections? From 60 to 80 percent, according to Russian authorities; around 20 percent, reckon independent observers. The blackout imposed on Chechnya prevents any precise assessment of the devastating effects of a ruthless conflict.

But censorship cannot completely hide the horror. Under the world's very eyes, a capital—Grozny, with 400,000 inhabitants—has been razed for the first time since Hitler's 1944 punishment of Warsaw.

Such inhumanity cannot plausibly be described as “anti-terrorism,” as Russia's president Vladimir Putin insists. The Russian military leadership claims to be fighting against a party of 700 to 2,000 combatants. What would be said if the British government had bombed Belfast or if the Spanish government bombed Bilbao, on the pretext of quelling the IRA or the ETA, respectively?

And yet the world remains silent in the face of the looting of Grozny and other Chechen towns and villages. Are Chechen women, children, and all Chechen civilians less entitled to respect than the rest of mankind? Are they still considered human? Nothing can excuse the seeming indifference displayed by our worldwide silence.

In Chechnya, our basic morality is at stake. Must the world accept the rape of girls who were kidnapped by the occupying forces or their militias? Should we tolerate the murder of children and abduction of boys to be tortured, broken, and sold back to their families, alive or dead? What about “filtration” camps, or “human firewood”? What about the villages exterminated to set an example? A few NGOs and some brave Russian and Western reporters have witnessed countless crimes. So we cannot say, “We did not know.”

Indeed, the fundamental principle of democracies and civilized states is at issue in Chechnya: civilians' right to life, including the protection of innocents, widows and orphans. International agreements and the United Nations charter are as binding in Chechnya as anywhere else. The right of nations to self-determination does not imply the right of rulers to dispose of their people.

The fight against terrorism is also at stake. Who has not yet realized that the Russian army is actually behaving like a group of pyromaniac fire-fighters, fanning the fires of terrorism through its behavior? After ten years of large-scale repression, the fire, far from going out, is spreading, crossing borders, setting the northern Caucasus ablaze and making combatants even fiercer.

How much longer can we ignore the fact that in raising the bogeyman of “Chechen terrorism,” the Russian government is suppressing the liberties gained when the Soviet empire collapsed? The Chechen War both masks and motivates the re-establishment of centralised power in Russia—bringing the media back under state control, passing laws against NGOs and reinforcing the “vertical line of power”—leaving no institutions and authorities able to challenge or limit the Kremlin. War, it seems, is hiding a return to autocracy.

Sadly, wars in Chechnya have been going on for 300 years. They were savage colonial conflicts under the tsar and almost genocidal under Stalin, who deported the whole Chechen population, a third of whom perished during their transfer to the Gulag.

Because we reject colonial and exterminating ventures, because we love Russian culture and believe that Russia can bloom in a democratic future and because we believe that terrorism—whether by stateless groups or state armies—should be condemned, we demand that the world's blackout on the Chechen issue must end. We must help Russia's authorities escape from the trap they set for themselves and into which they fell, putting not only Chechens and Russians, but the world at risk.

It would be tragic if, during the G8 summit scheduled for St. Petersburg, Russia, in June, the Chechen issue were pushed to the side. This dreadful and endless war needs to be discussed openly if it is to end peacefully.

scene and, quite paradoxically, thanks to his opinion on the Beneš Decrees.¹² Somewhat in contradiction to the declared internationalism of the communist movement, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia has taken a strongly nationalistic stance on this issue.

Criticism of the Havel faction on the question of Chechnya and Russia has not, however, been limited to communists. Smaller news media such as *Britské listy* (which publishes writers of many different ideological stances and often extremist opinions) have occasionally criticized the Havel group as “selling out” to the United States.¹³ More pragmatic criticism has been aimed against a cosmopolitan program of promoting human rights at the cost of, for example, worsened relations and the corresponding loss of potential profits from international trade with countries like Russia and China, countries that the former president has criticized. These are minority views but by no means isolated. With the accession to the presidency in 2003 of Václav Klaus of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the government of Jiří Paroubek and the Czech Social Democrats (ČSSD), this pragmatism began to play the lead role in the formulation of Czech foreign policy.

State Institutions. Historically, the attitude of the Czech government toward the Chechen conflict, which necessarily at first reflected the mostly positive popular attitude toward the Chechen struggle for independence, but also the international non-recognition of Chechen independence, can be divided into two periods: the Havel presidency (1993–2003) and afterward. Havel was and is acknowledged worldwide as a moral authority. His condemnation, during his presidential administration, of the violations of human rights in the North Caucasus played an important role in the formulation of Czech foreign policy with respect to Russia, and he partially succeeded in reorienting the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government agencies. The cabinet has constitutional responsibility for Czech foreign policy,¹⁴ but both of the post-1989 presidents—and especially Klaus on questions relating to European integration—have nonetheless played a very activist role in this area.

At the 1999 OSCE summit meeting in Istanbul, Havel denounced Russia for unleashing the second Chechen conflict. Among his accusations, he declared, “The Russian Federation cannot defend its integrity the way that it is now being done, nor can it fight against terrorism in this manner.”¹⁵ In May 2000, Havel and People in Need held a public hearing on human rights violations in Chechnya. Summing up the meeting, he directed the

following statement to Russia: “We cannot tolerate a state, no matter how powerful that state may be, if it is repressing people. . . . We cannot tolerate the repression of national individuality.”¹⁶

These steps, however, were not entirely in accordance with government policy, which itself was rather contradictory. At approximately the same time as Havel’s hearings, Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Kavan (ČSSD)—later elected chairman of the UN General Assembly with the negotiated support of Belarus, a country with a poor human rights record—spoke of the need to prevent Russia from being isolated and rejected the possibility of suspending Russia’s membership in the Council of Europe.¹⁷ On the other hand, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs position statement on the situation in Chechnya, dated December 1999, expresses concern about the “continuing violations of human rights and humanitarian principles,” and urges Russia to stop the fighting.¹⁸ At the same time, the Foreign Relations Committee of the Chamber of Deputies (the lower chamber of the Czech parliament) voted to send a letter to the Russian Duma that singled out the disproportionate use of force in Russian military operations and called for negotiations with Chechen representatives led by President Aslan Maskhadov.¹⁹

Overall, Havel succeeded in getting Czech state institutions to consider issues related to human rights abroad. He has continued to speak out on the Chechen conflict since the end of his presidency. In 2006, for example, he stated his views in an open letter (“End the Silence over Chechnya”) that was also signed by the philanthropist George Soros and by Karel Schwarzenberg, then a senator and publisher of the weekly journal *Respekt*.

With Havel’s departure from office and more pragmatic politicians assuming supreme executive power, the Czech position on relations with Russia and human rights violations in Chechnya has undergone a re-evaluation. This development was motivated partly by populist pragmatism, manifested as an emphasis on the economic interests of the Czech Republic, as opposed to the cosmopolitan—and therefore rather abstract—norm of human rights, and also by a growing awareness of the ways that terrorists fight fed by the reports from Beslan (2004). Evidence of these new tendencies includes the government’s response to Putin’s visit to Prague in 2006. Putin’s presence sparked protests by non-governmental organizations against the violations of human rights in the North Caucasus, but in contrast to his earlier meeting with Angela Merkel, Germany’s newly appointed chancellor, the topic of Chechnya was scarcely mentioned during his talks with President Klaus and Prime Minister Paroubek.



A woman wearing head-to-toe robes that reveal only her eyes with Arabic script printed on the hood, one of armed Chechens, who seized a crowded Moscow theater in October 2002, poses with a pistol somewhere inside the theater in this image from television by Russia's NTV. Such symbolism contributed to the public perception that the Chechen rebels are Islamic terrorists. (AP Photo/NTV Russian Channel)

The discussions in Prague concentrated on trade relations. According to the joint declaration, the two presidents “appreciated the pragmatism and respect in their mutual relations.”²⁰ Klaus subsequently expressed agreement with Putin, saying, “You cannot resolve [the situation in Chechnya] by the waving of some magic wand.”²¹ However, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not lost its interest in human rights altogether. In connection with Cuba, for example, the Czech Republic, unlike Spain and other countries, has very fiercely promoted maintaining EU sanctions.²² A former director of People in Need, Tomáš Pojar, now serves as deputy foreign minister for bilateral relations.

In the fall of 2006, Paroubek’s government was replaced by a right-center coalition led by Mirek Topolánek (ODS).²³ Although this government, with Count Karel Schwarzenberg as foreign minister, has taken a bold

stance against Russia in the case of hosting U.S. missile defense facilities and presents itself as much more restrained vis-à-vis continuing European political integration, on other issues, including Chechnya, it has yet not formulated a position. For the time being, it seems likely that the issue of U.S. military facilities in the Czech Republic will remain the focus of Czech-Russian relations. Whether or not Czech politicians will revive Chechnya as an instrument for “rhetorical action” against Russia remains to be seen.²⁴ Topolánek opposed Klaus on many domestic and party issues, but his foreign policy priorities beyond the EU are still unclear.

Civil Society. Czech non-governmental organizations, especially People in Need and Czech Catholic Charity, have been the voice of civil society on the Chechen conflict, both at home and abroad. In addition, a small, somewhat *ad hoc* group has concentrated on defending the Chechen resistance and drawing attention to Russian human rights violations. It has often staged demonstrations in front of the embassy of the Russian Federation in Prague, especially at times when public attention to the Chechen conflict has increased, such as at the beginning of both wars. For example, in 1999 the Czech Helsinki Committee spoke out in open letters to several important Russian officials that described the Russian attack as “disproportionate intervention and a gross violation of human rights.”

The People in Need foundation and humanitarian organization was co-founded in 1994 by Nadace Lidových Novin (Lidové Noviny Foundation), a foundation launched by Šimon Pánek, the student leader of the November 1989 revolution, Jaromír Štřtina, a journalist, and the Czech Television network. The organization sponsors humanitarian projects in Nagorno-Karabakh and Bosnia. Its personnel and structure connect it to the pro-Havel current of Czech opinion. People in Need is the largest Czech non-governmental organization, with projects in the Czech Republic and in many other countries around the world. Thanks to Štřtina, in particular, Chechnya has always had a very significant place in the activities of People in Need. After the outbreak of the first conflict, the foundation organized a fund-raiser, sent a humanitarian-aid convoy to the North Caucasus, and set up a permanent mission there. It undertook similar activities again in 1999, when, together with Czech Catholic Charity, it became the main agent for UN humanitarian assistance. After providing for basic needs, it concentrated on reconstruction of housing, schools, and hospitals.²⁵ In recent years, however, it has come under growing pressure from

the Russian government, which has used the news media to accuse People in Need of supporting Chechen terrorism. The foundation ended its on-site activities in 2005, soon after Ministry of the Interior security forces raided one of its buildings in downtown Grozny. A Chechen rebel was killed during the raid; he apparently had been hiding in the building unbeknown to the organization. The Russian security agents confiscated a printer supposedly used to manufacture false documents together with a small cache of weapons. One of the few other foreign humanitarian organizations active in the North Caucasus, the Danish Refugee Council, would later fall victim to similar harassment.²⁶

People in Need was a thorn in the sides of both Moscow and the pro-Russian Chechen government not because of its reconstruction projects, but because it openly aroused worldwide public opinion by issuing reports directly from the scene of the conflict. The activities of People in Need in relation to Chechnya went well beyond the implementation of humanitarian projects. Fully in accord with its focus on human rights, the foundation regularly reported news on human rights violations in Chechnya to the Czech public using the news server Infoservis.cz and through several documentaries created in collaboration by People in Need and Czech Television. The films, such as *Odvrácená strana světa* (The Far Side of the World, 1999), *Anatomie války* (Anatomy of War, 1997), and *Čečenský sen* (Chechen Dream, 1995), mainly came from the studios of the journalists Jaromír Štšтина and Petra Procházková. They were broadcast on state television and were shown at the One World (Jeden svět) human rights festival, held by the foundation every year since 1999. The festival regularly devotes considerable attention to Chechnya.

Czech News Media. The news media have played an exceptionally important role in shaping Czech reactions to the Chechen conflict. Their role may be described as mutually dependent—Czech society has formed its opinions through the media, while the media recognize that reportage on the conflict has limited marketability and have consequently dedicated somewhat limited attention to it. Specific news outlets have not infrequently promulgated rather different views of events in the North Caucasus and have created different schemata for their interpretation.

One camp consists of media connected with the pro-Havel faction and with People in Need. Chief among them is *Lidové noviny*, long one of the country's most widely read periodicals. The two most important journalists

covering events in Russia, Chechnya, and other zones of Eurasia since the early 1990s are Petra Procházková and Jaromír Štšтина, who founded their own agency, Epicentrum, for that purpose. *Lidové noviny* has printed stories with provocative headlines like “Chechen Election Staged by the Kremlin” (“Čečenské volby režíroval Kreml,” November 28, 2005). Nonetheless, the relative marginality of the topic of Chechnya is reflected in public attitudes. For example, the death of Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev in July 2006 received coverage for only a few days, while the killing of Chechen president Abdul-Khalim Sadulayev a month earlier got only a brief mention, without any commentary on the dubious version of events presented by the Russian government. Other news media on this side of the debate include *Respekt*, a liberal weekly magazine with a pro-Havel stance and a smaller readership. Among other items, it has carried interviews with the insurgent leader Aslan Maskhadov and the former Chechen foreign minister Ilyas Akhmadov during the latter's visit to Prague in 1999, which was ignored by the government.²⁷ It has also published articles critical of Russian policy. *Hospodářské noviny*, a daily focusing on the economy published in cooperation with *Handesblatt* and the *Wall Street Journal Europe*, has long expressed a somewhat less negative but still critical stance. The Czech Radio network has also tended to be critical of Russian policy in Chechnya. During the early days of the conflict, news reports by state-run Czech Television were also critical of Russian policy. This channel's role in the activities of People in Need—for which it was criticized by opposing groups—and its support of documentaries on the violation of human rights in Chechnya have already been mentioned. TV reporter Martin Yazairi provided detailed coverage of the tragedy in Beslan direct from the scene. Otherwise, however, events in the North Caucasus currently receive only marginal attention.

Without any doubt, the most important figures in the field of news reporting on the Chechen war are Petra Procházková and Jaromír Štšтина. They both worked at *Lidové noviny*—Štšтина as its Russia correspondent from 1990—until they founded their own agency, Epicentrum, in 1994. The agency's coverage of events in Eurasian and African conflict zones has won international renown for its founders. Štšтина, for example, received the prestigious Novartis Award for journalism from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies for the documentary *The Far Side of the World*. Because of their activities as reporters critical of Russian policy in the North Caucasus, they have both been prohibited from entering Russian territory. In 2004 Štšтина was elected to

the Senate of the Czech Republic, where he has dedicated himself to human rights issues and speaks out against the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia. As a Czech senator, he has been forbidden by Belarusian authorities to enter Belarus because of the country's alleged "support for Chechen terrorists who have waged genocide against the Russian people."²⁸

The Czech news media have also criticized Procházková and Štšтина for their condemnation of the Russian government and their leaning toward some elements of the Chechen resistance, especially those close to former Chechen president Maskhadov. They have also been accused, quite falsely, of supporting Shamil Basayev, especially during the emotionally charged period after the events in Beslan. They both knew Basayev personally during their work in Chechnya and had several interviews with him. Critics took issue with their refusal to embrace a one-dimensional condemnation of Basayev and their insistence on describing him as a product of the cycle of violence and cruelty unleashed by Russia in the 1990s. In response to this criticism, which resurfaced after they covered Basayev's death, Štšтина commented:

Never could I ever have expounded the thesis that the evil Russians are at fault for everything. That is too primitive a formulation, and it is moreover contradictory to my Russophilia, of which I am proud. So I will say it again (although after all these years I feel like I am wasting my breath): Chechen terror is a reaction to the terror of the Army of the Russian Federation, to the terror of the Interior Ministry forces of the Russian Federation and to the terror of the Federal Security Services of the Russian Federation . . . both forms of terror are equally condemnable and should be subject to the same prosecution, both in accordance with Russian legislation and international law. Just as much a criminal as Basayev is the former defense minister, General [Pavel] Grachev. The deaths of the children in Beslan are just as horrifying as the death of forty thousand Chechen children killed by Russian soldiers. . . . Given the situation whereby Russia has turned Chechnya into an information black hole, hardly anyone is able to get a truthful picture of the conflict, the Chechen resistance is already today an epic story of the courage and persistence of a small nation.²⁹

At the other end of the media spectrum is the daily newspaper of the Communist Party, *Haló noviny*, which completely shares the view of the Chechen conflict and current Russian policy held by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia. Besides invective directed against President Havel—for reasons, as said above, going beyond his stance on the Chechen conflict—and against the anti-

communist circles close to him, including People in Need, the paper also presents events relating to the Chechen resistance with a pro-Russian slant. As already pointed out, the communist daily's view is somewhat difficult to comprehend with respect to its ideological foundation, but the pro-Russia slant has been evident, for example, in its reporting on the hostage situation at the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow (2002), which led to a temporary rise in Czech media attention to the Chechen conflict.

Haló noviny is the only Czech news outlet whose coverage is generally favorable to Russia and unfavorable to the Chechen rebels. In contrast, *Lidové noviny* has printed the most articles with the opposite view, nearly all of them from the pen of Petra Procházková. *Respekt*, *Český rozhlas*, and *Hospodářské noviny* report less frequently on Chechnya. Their news coverage has been evaluated as favorable to the struggle for independence but not to the terrorist attacks.³⁰ The Chechen side of the conflict and the pro-Havel current sympathizing with the more moderate rebels and criticizing Russia's violations of human rights have been subject to criticism from sources other than just *Haló noviny*, such as polemics published by various other news outlets. These voices all tend to see Havel's approach to human rights as inconsistent and harmful to Czech economic interests but cannot be assigned to definable opinion groups.

Conclusion

Since its beginning, Czech social and political discourse has never treated the conflict in Chechnya as an issue of great salience, nor has there ever been a mass mobilization in support of one side or the other. Reactions to the conflict have been left for the most part to the elite, who have sought to influence public opinion through the news media and, to a lesser extent, through demonstrations and media campaigns against violations of human rights in the North Caucasus. Public interest in the conflict has fluctuated—popular discussion was strongest at the beginning of the first and second Chechen wars and in connection with the terrorist attacks at the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow and the school in Beslan.

Czech public opinion has to some extent been influenced by the Western media depiction of the conflict, an image that in turn has been influenced by geopolitical factors. For example, the stance of the United States has changed radically, particularly in connection with the launching of a worldwide campaign against terrorism in which Russia has suddenly become an ally. Even so, a distinctly Czech viewpoint can be found among the diverse

ideological positions espoused in Czech society. While world opinion now tends to regard Chechnya as a case of Islamist terrorism, Czech elites have been among the few persistent critics of the human rights violations there.

The front-line fighters of this camp are drawn mainly from the circle around former president Václav Havel, notably the humanitarian organization People in Need, the journalists Jaromír Štština and Petra Procházková, and the weekly journal *Respekt*. The ideological bond of this current was present in government agencies during Havel's presidency, but gave way to the pragmatic strand after he left office in 2003. However, key portions of Czech civil society and the media have continued to criticize the many violations of human rights in the North Caucasus, especially those perpetrated by Russian military and security forces, and to express sympathy for the secular elements of the Chechen resistance, and especially the faction associated with the late president Maskhadov.

Standing in opposition to this current is an ideologically somewhat heterogeneous group consisting mainly of Czech communists (who view Russia as a possible barrier against U.S. imperialism and criticize Havel's emphasis on human rights and his criticism of the Castro regime in Cuba), but also of pragmatists who see criticism of Russia's Chechnya policy based on a cosmopolitan notion of human rights that endangers the economic and other interests of the Czech nation. This is also the position of the current Czech president, Václav Klaus.

In large part, world opinion associates the Chechen rebels with Islamism because of the way Moscow has manipulated the interpretation of their terrorist operations in Russia. Members of the Havel circle in the news media who reject this simplified view, and interpret those terrorist acts—which they unambiguously condemn—as the product of a cycle of violence and cruelty unleashed by Russia, have come under growing criticism for supposedly favoring the terrorists.

In the 1990s, most Czechs tacitly supported the Chechen rebels, seeing them as fighting for freedom and self-determination for a nation repressed by the dying remnant of the Soviet empire. This position has been eroded by the shift of some elements of the resistance movement toward radical Islamism, the new global paradigm of a war against terrorism, and the spread of Islamophobia.

The attitudes of the elite groups mentioned above, however, remain fundamentally unchanged. Nonetheless, the North Caucasus seems to be slowly but surely dropping out of sight from the perspective of Czech society, thanks to the termination of People in Need's fieldwork in Chechnya and the *de facto* ban on access to

the conflict zone by foreign journalists. As a result, Czech perceptions of the Chechen war seem to be converging with those of other Western countries, perhaps with the notable exception of Poland. The ongoing division at the elite level, however, and the ongoing efforts of one of its major components are likely to guarantee that this change will not be absolute and that Czech discourse will retain some unique characteristics.

The Chechen issue could be revived in the context of the wider debate about hosting a U.S. anti-missile defense radar facility in the Czech Republic and Russia's opposition to the proposal. Yet proponents of the U.S. facilities have so far been in the minority and have not brandished the Chechen/North Caucasus case to undermine Russia's stated commitment to peace and respect for international law. It is, rather, the U.S. position and the declared "other" against whom the anti-missile defense is aimed that has been deconstructed in the Czech media. Most Czechs, and especially most members of the political elite, have been calling for a multi-lateral (e.g., NATO) solution to the missile-umbrella question and do not consider Russia's concerns to be illegitimate.

Notes

1. Vladimir Putin at the Munich conference on security, February 10, 2007; quoted from the official transcript of his speech available in Russian and English at www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912ty pe82914type82917type84779_118135.shtml.

2. *Izvestia* (December 22, 1994).

3. In reality, however, it was Yeltsin's supporters, democrats, liberals, and pro-Western forces that opposed the war. The silence of Western leaders weakened their position, while giving new impetus to Yeltsin's opponents and the proponents of the war.

4. "OSCE Report on Human Rights Violations in Chechnya," March 25, 1996. OSCE Archives.

5. There are two competing versions of the September 1999 terrorist attacks. According to some sources, the bombings in Moscow, Buynaksk, and Volgograd were carried out by the Russian secret services in an attempt to psychologically prepare Russian society for a renewed invasion of Chechnya and make sure that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin would win the presidential elections in 2000. See, for example, the controversial account by Alexander Litvinenko and Yuri Felshtinsky, *Blowing Up Russia: The Secret Plot to Bring Back KGB Terror* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007). The original Russian text of the book (*FSB vzryvaet Rossiю*) is available at www.terror99.ru/book.htm (see chap. 5). Interestingly, the claim that the Chechens organized the terrorist attacks has never been proved. According to a Russian court verdict (2004) whose fairness has been questioned by some international observers, Yusuf Krymshamkhalov and Achimez Gochiyaev, both Karachais who were believed to have strong links to Chechen extremists, were charged with carrying out the terrorist attacks in Russian cities. For a more detailed analysis of all these events, see Emil Souleimanov, *An Endless War: The Russian-Chechen Conflict in Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 147–59.

6. Quoted from Online NewsHour, February 16, 2000 (www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/election/jan-june00/bush_2-16.html).

7. Itar-Tass (November 18, 1999).

8. One factor that greatly contributed to the image of the Chechens is the widely disseminated information about the brutal executions of kidnapped Western journalists or North Caucasus specialists in the years between the wars. A second factor is the ever more indiscriminate terrorist attacks in Russian

cities, including the suicide attacks carried out after 2002 by Chechen commandos, especially by women, the so-called black widows, whose distinctive clothing has made it possible to speak of Islamic characteristics and compare Chechen activities to those of terrorist organizations active in or coming from the Middle East. Events in Chechnya suddenly came to be perceived in this broader ideological context, and this greatly reinforced the image of Chechens as ruthless religious fanatics.

9. However, Russophobia never took root very deeply in Bohemia and Moravia, as opposed to the situation in Poland, where it was affected by a rather different historical experience

10. Anti-Russian sentiment in Czech society peaked in the early 1990s, as memorably depicted in Jan Sverak's 1996 Academy Award-winning movie *Kolya*, yet the level was still lower than in Poland or Hungary. A quantitative comparative study would be useful to verify such an inference.

11. Zdeněk Hrabica, *Haló noviny* (July 2, 2004).

12. The so-called Beneš Decrees are a set of executive-law acts issued by President Edvard Beneš (1945–48) in the aftermath of World War II and subsequently confirmed by the interim National Assembly of the Republic of Czechoslovakia. They included the Decree on Punishment of Nazi Criminals, Traitors, and their Collaborators and on Extraordinary People's Courts (June 19, 1945) and the Decree on Seizure and Rapid Redistribution of Farm Property of Germans, Hungarians, as well as Traitors and Enemies to the Czech and Slovak Nation (June 21, 1945). The latter decree was subject to debate in the late 1990s, and some associations of transferred Germans called for it to be declared void, which could have opened the way for large-scale property movements. See <http://web.archive.org/web/20051108210402/www.mkcr.cz/article.php?id=1076/>.

13. Milan Valach, "Lidská práva jako sentimentální žvást" (Human Rights as Sentimental Hogwash), *Britské listy* (September 21, 2004), www.blisty.cz/2004/9/21/art19836.html.

14. According to the Czech constitution (www.psp.cz/docs/laws/constitution.html), the president is the head of state (Article 54) but the government is the supreme executive authority.

15. Czech Foreign Ministry Archives, November 1999, www.mzv.cz/_archiv/data_dokumenty/data11.html.

16. Czech Foreign Ministry Archives, www.mzv.cz/_archiv/data_dokumenty/dokumenty052000.html.

17. Kavan was one of the main figures in a series of investigative reports by British and Swedish media in early 2007 on the widespread corruption of Czech politicians by the British company BAE Systems in connection with the proposed purchase of a squadron of Saab JAS 39 Gripen fighter jets in the early 2000s. See "Vše o korupční kauze Gripeny" (The Gripen Corruption in Focus), *Aktualne.cz*, <http://aktualne.centrum.cz/clanek.phtml?id=368149/>.

18. Czech Foreign Ministry Archives, www.mzv.cz/www/mzv/default.asp?id=1192&ido=10544&idj=1&amb=1/.

19. Minutes of the 27th session of the Foreign Relations Committee, November 17–18, 1999, www.psp.cz/sqw/text/text2.sqw?C=5112&T=k1998psp3v/.

20. Martina Lustigova, "Putin mluvil hlavne o ekonomice" (Putin Discussed Mainly Economics), *Radio.cz* (March 2, 2006), www.radio.cz/cz/zpravy/76433/.

21. Petr Gabal, "Prezident Klaus dnes nevidi duvod resit to, co udela Breznev v roce 1968" (President Klaus Sees No Reason Today to Discuss What Brezhnev Did in 1968), *Radio.cz* (March 2, 2006), www.radio.cz/cz/clanek/76421/limit/.

22. Speculation about whether the different approaches toward Russia and Cuba are based on geopolitical determinants, leveling the balance of trade, or other factors goes beyond the scope of this study.

23. Topolánek's government did not receive a vote of confidence until January 19, 2007.

24. On the concept of rhetorical action, see Frank Schimmelfenig, *The EU, NATO, and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For two case studies of rhetorical action in Czech Republic–Russia relations, see Petr Kratochvíl, Petra Cibulková, and Vít Beneš, "Foreign Policy, Rhetorical Action and the Idea of Otherness: The Czech Republic and Russia," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39, no. 4 (December 2006): 497–511.

25. Reports on the activities of People in Need in the North Caucasus are available in English at www.clovekvtisni.cz/index2en.php?parent=402&sid=402&id=456/.

26. The group was forced to discontinue its activities on orders from Ramzan Kadyrov in 2006 in connection with the scandal involving the printing of a caricature of Muhammad ("The Islamic Flare-Up; Chechnya Expels Danish Aid Agency," *New York Times* [February 8, 2006]).

27. The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs distanced itself from the visit, even though Akhmadov met with highly placed ministry officials, one of whom called him a "legitimate representative of the Chechen administration." The Russian government reacted with a note of protest, to which the Czech Foreign Ministry responded, "The actions of Russian military and security forces in Chechnya already long ago ceased to be merely an internal affair of the Russian Federation." See "A Reply to Russian Federation's Protest Note Related to the Negotiations of the Chechen President's Envoy, I. Akhmadov, in Prague," Czech Foreign Ministry Archives (November 22, 1999), www.mzv.cz/www/mzv/default.asp?id=1181&ido=10544&idj=1&amb=1/.

28. Quoted from an interview with Jaromír Štětina on Radiožurnál radio station (January 26, 2006); transcript available at www.jaromirstetina.cz/aktuality/leden-2006/jaromir-stetina-hostem-radiozurnalu.html.

29. *Týdeník Rozhlas* (July 17, 2006), quoted from www.jaromirstetina.cz/media/cervenec-2006/nekrolog-na-zlocince.html.

30. The analysis has been removed to archives of the agency and is now available at http://old.anopress.cz/TT_CZ/analyzy/Cecensti_teroriste/Cecensti_teroriste.htm.

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