

The Beslan hostage tragedy: the lies of the Putin government and its media

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The hostage-taking tragedy in the town of Beslan in North Ossetia has demonstrated the lengths to which the ruling elite in Russia is prepared to go in deceiving its own people. Four days after the hostage drama began with terrorists seizing over 1,000 children, parents and teachers, elementary facts still remain unclear. The Russian government has denied the people the most important and elementary right—that of reliable, rapid and extensive information on what has taken place.

From the beginning of the crisis on the morning of September 1 to its tragic end two days later, leading politicians, representatives of the secret police and the major media outlets in Russia conducted a deliberate campaign of disinformation regarding the extent of the catastrophe and its dreadful consequences.

From the outset, the number of hostages was deliberately underestimated. The official figure of 354 hostages was repeated by television channels and in the public appearances of government representatives up to the point of the storming of the school building.

Early on in the crisis, much higher figures for the hostages were provided by newspapers and Internet sources, yet the television networks held firm to their original claim. After talks September 2 between the hostage takers and the former president of Ingushetia, Ruslan Aushev—resulting in the release of 26 women and children—the media repeated its estimate, even though the real extent of the hostage taking could at that stage hardly be concealed.

Aushev had seen how many people had been incarcerated in the gymnasium hall. One of the women released September 2 told the press: “There are many hostages, very many. I think a thousand.” Another woman whose two children remained in the school said: “According to the list 860 children attend the school. Maybe half of them did not come to the school’s opening ceremony. Then there are the parents. Look around at how many people are standing here. Here in the House of Culture there are 1,000 people and all of them have at least one relative or child in the school.”

Similar reports appeared in newspapers and Internet magazines. Nevertheless the television channels remained stubbornly attached to their original figure.

At the outset of the drama, a decision was made at the highest political level that under no circumstances would information be released concerning the terrorists’ demands. This was a lesson that the Putin government had drawn from the hostage drama at the Moscow Musical Theatre “Nordost” in 2002. Relatives of the hostages then held captive inside the theatre had demonstrated for an end to the Russian war in Chechnya. The demand met with widespread popular support, and the Kremlin has had great difficulty suppressing this political sentiment.

This time it was claimed that the terrorists had made no demands. A statement calling for an end to the Chechen war and the withdrawal of Russian troops made at the start of the hostage crisis by an Islamist group was kept secret. In addition, the government maintained that all of its efforts to make contact with the terrorists had been ignored.

On September 6, *Gazeta.ru* reported that the afternoon of September 1 and not far from the school, “Parents of children being held in the school had addressed the Russian president in a video. They called upon him to fulfill all the demands of the terrorists in order to save the lives of the children.”

All the major television and other media outlets kept this information secret for a considerable period.

According to numerous witnesses, the hostage takers made no secret about their demands. For example, on September 3, *Izvestia* interviewed a teacher who had been released along with her three-year-old daughter. Question: “Did the terrorists tell you their demands?” Answer: “They said they had just one demand: the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya.”

Immediately after news of the hostage taking broke, leading to widespread popular anguish, representatives of the Russian government declared that everything would be done to avoid an armed assault on the school by security forces. In fact, nothing was done to prevent such a storming of the school.

According to a commentary in the newspaper *Izvestia*, the drama “took the worst possible turn.” The government sought to hide its own failure by claiming that the storming of the building had not been prepared, and even that there were no plans for such an action. This claim is contradicted by a series of facts and reports by witnesses.

On September 3, the paper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported that “intelligence forces were preparing to storm the school.” The paper referred to the fact that on the night of September 1 specially equipped military transport planes had landed in North Ossetia. The paper also said it was presumed that the anti-terror unit “Alfa” had been flown in.

It is now known that “Alfa” and another anti-terror unit, “Vimpel,” played the decisive role in the storming of the building. The very fact that, following the unexpected exchange of fire on September 3, the terrorists immediately began shooting and set off previously installed explosives indicates that they were sure a storming of the building would take place.

Bearing these facts in mind—the demands of the terrorists that were never disclosed, the refusal of the government to undertake any discussions with the hostage-takers, the scale of the censorship of information regarding what was taking place inside the school and the positioning of the special forces units in the front line—the newspaper *Gazeta.ru* concluded on September 4: “The storming had in fact been prepared and was to have been carried out within the next two days. Without water, the children could only have survived for three or four days, and then it would have no longer been possible to rescue most of the hostages. However, on Friday they were forced to take action.”

Even after the catastrophe had taken place—bombs had gone off in the gym, part of which had collapsed—the government and the media continued to lie by minimizing the number of casualties.

The official death toll rose only as the bodies began to be counted. According to government sources on Monday morning, September 6, 335

dead had been counted. At the same time it became clear there existed a list of missing persons totaling 260. According to the radio station “Echo Moscow,” these victims feature neither on the lists of those who have died nor on the list of those who have been hospitalized.

On Saturday, inhabitants of Beslan, who observed coffins with victims inside being transported from the burnt out ruins of the school, reported that they had counted a total of between 500 and 600.

Against this background it is hardly necessary to examine the other lies broadcast by the Russian media about the number of terrorists involved—which was also minimized—or the course of events that was officially reported in wildly varying versions.

The overall conduct of the Russian media, in particular the major television networks, was shameful. While in the West many television stations devoted special coverage to the events in North Ossetia, often working with Russian cameramen, Russian television refused to interrupt its regular programming.

At one point in the crisis, a correspondent for the Russian television channel NTW addressed the camera and bluntly declared, “We cannot say what is happening; we cannot comment on the actions of those involved in the fighting!”

It is no wonder that television journalists have been physically assaulted by Beslan inhabitants. As the first information emerged on the real extent of the casualties, outraged bystanders turned on television journalists, lashing out at their cameras and the reporters themselves.

The role played by Russian television, however, only expressed the iron-fisted control exerted over the major media outlets by Putin’s Kremlin, which has brought every television channel under either direct or indirect state control. The Russian regime has enforced media subservience with intimidation and state gangsterism, which is backed by much of Russia’s ruling strata of corrupt businessmen and ex-Stalinist bureaucrats.

Putin used the hostage-taking crisis at the Moscow theatre two years ago to consolidate this grip over the media, claiming that it had abused freedom of the press in its coverage. He demanded that the news outlets report nothing that could conceivably aid the terrorists, including their statements or demands, analysis of the events or coverage of Russian military and police operations.

This noose is tightening. The editor in chief of *Izvestia*, Raf Shakirov, announced his forced resignation Monday after coming under fire from the Kremlin and the newspaper’s corporate publishers over its coverage of the Beslan events. The paper filled its entire front page last Saturday with a photograph of a man carrying a wounded child from the besieged school. The newspaper also raised pointed questions about the official claim that only 350 people were held hostage and published a stinging column denouncing the self-censorship by the television channels.

Meanwhile, a prominent Russian journalist who has reported critically on the war in Chechnya was prevented from reaching the scene of the latest hostage-taking tragedy under circumstances that can only be described as ominous.

Novaya Gazeta correspondent Anna Politkovskaya fell sick after drinking tea during the first leg of her flight to Beslan. Rushed to the hospital after landing in Rostov, she was diagnosed with acute food poisoning. According to one report, authorities had blocked her from boarding her original flight, but the captain of another airliner recognized her and invited her aboard.

The suppression of the media, together with the impotence of the Russian parliament—the Duma chose not to meet during the crisis, with its leaders affirming that all they could do was issue another statement—are hallmarks of the authoritarian state that Putin is consolidating in Russia.

The president’s resort to the methods of state censorship, however, is a manifestation of the general impotence and political isolation of the regime as a whole. Under conditions of historically unprecedented social inequality between a thin layer of “new Russian” entrepreneurs and

masses of impoverished working people, democratic forms of rule are not possible.

While capable of buying off or intimidating his political opponents and much of the media, Putin has proven unable to resolve any of the deepening crises wracking Russia, from the war in Chechnya and other outbreaks of regional separatism, to the generalized corruption and breakdown that characterizes the entire state apparatus and the economy. All of these crises came together to produce the tragedy in Beslan.

While these failures are behind the drive to control the media, the ham-fisted censorship carried out in the latest crisis has provoked widespread anger and opposition within the former Soviet Union. The “democratic reforms” that were touted as a byproduct of the collapse of the USSR and the introduction of capitalism have produced instead a media that is in many ways reminiscent of the worst of the Stalinist period, based on lies and deception and dedicated to the suppression of any news that casts the head of state in a bad light.

Putin has seized upon the atrocity in Beslan to claim even more authoritarian power and to reject any suggestion of negotiating an end to the brutal war in Chechnya. His transparent aim is to emulate Bush in claiming unlimited power to carry out repression in the name of a “war on terror.”

While hundreds of thousands turned out at rallies against terrorism that were organized with state support on Tuesday, the mood of outrage was directed not only at the terrorists, but at the government itself.

The harshest anger was expressed at a rally in the North Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz, about 18 miles north of Beslan. The crowd that turned out in the city’s central square protested not only against terrorism, but the state authorities as well.

“Today, we will bury our children and tomorrow we will come here and throw these devils out of their seats, from the lowest director up to ministers and the president,” a speaker at the rally declared.

A protest sign raised above the crowd read, “Corrupt authority is a source of terrorism.”



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