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Two opposing points of view portray the events taking place on the territory of the Chechen Republic. The first may be described as a myth and emanates from the Russian leadership; its voice is President Putin and the state-owned mass media. The second point of view may be heard from non-governmental organizations, which closely monitor the situation and record numerous instances of human rights abuses.

Myth #1. In Chechnya Russian federal forces are fighting international terrorism.

Evidence shows that foreign mercenaries play only a minor role among the Chechen separatists. The majority of the fighting force is comprised of armed citizens of the Chechen Republic, who often are the relatives of civilians who were killed as a result of the numerous bombardments and "clean-up operations" (zachistka) conducted by the federal troops. Their main political goal is the independence of the Chechen Republic.

Myth #2. The phase of open military confrontation on Chechen territory is over. Local police actions are underway, aimed at liquidating the remaining terrorist bases.

In reality, neither the intensity of the military confrontations nor the number of victims among civilians and combatants has abated. Every month, dozens of civilians in Chechnya die or disappear without a trace as a result of actions by the federal forces. Casualties among military servicemen are just as high. Moreover, quite recently the conflict has been "Palestinized" by suicide bombers. Their operations include: an explosion in Grozny’s Government House (72 persons killed); the terrorist act in the Nadrechniy region (60 persons killed); an attempt to "blow up" [pro-Moscow leader...
Akhmat] Kadyrov in Islikhan-Yurta; an explosion during the rock festival in Moscow caused by Chechen female suicide bombers (17 persons killed); and an explosion on Tverskaya Street.

Myth # 3. Having completed the military confrontation phase of the campaign, the federal government has proceeded to settle the Chechen conflict by political means; for this purpose, a referendum on a new Chechen constitution was held in March 2003 and elections for a new President of the Chechen Republic were held in October 2003.

In reality, both the referendum and the elections were held while an active military campaign was continuing. Ordinary people are intimidated. Elections conducted under these conditions cannot be considered legitimate, in accordance with international norms. The only way to a political settlement is to stop military actions, open negotiations between the opposing sides, exchange prisoners of war, demilitarize the area and only then hold elections for new governmental institutions.

Myth #4. President Putin has called Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov one of the leaders of international terrorism. In accordance with his thesis that "there can be no negotiations with terrorists," Putin therefore refused to conduct peace talks with Maskhadov, despite the fact that the latter has expressed his readiness to do so several times.

The fact is that Maskhadov became President through nationwide elections in Chechnya, which were acknowledged at the time by the Russian government and the international community. He has not been involved in terrorist activities against civilians. Putin's position is further compromised by his simultaneous active support for the concept of negotiations between the leaders of Israel and Yassir Arafat (formerly an active terrorist), putative negotiations, into which key terrorist groups such as "Islamic Jihad," "Hamas," "Fatah" and others in effect are already being drawn.

Thus, two conflicting points of view regarding the Chechen conflict exist.
President Putin, presenting a distorted version of events, is counting, first and foremost, on the support of leaders of key world powers and, unfortunately, is obtaining it. The "International Community" thus, in effect, is complicit in the actions of the federal forces in Chechnya, and closing its eyes to gross human rights abuses.

The only hope Russian NGOs have is for their voice to be heard by the Western public and to have the latter, in turn, find ways to influence their leaders.

The only means of stopping the Chechen conflict is for the opposing sides to negotiate directly. Aslan Mashadov, as President of the Chechen Republic, has to be a direct participant in such talks.

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