

> We are hurtling back into a Soviet abyss, into an information vacuum that spells death from our own ignorance.
>
> Anna Politkovskaya

Photo: HRC Memorial

1999-2009:

Media in the Second Russian-Chechen War



The Second Russian-Chechen War, which began in the summer of 1999, coincided with increased censorship of the media by the Russian state under Vladimir Putin. Journalists faced accreditation requirements, restrictions on access to the conflict zone, and reprisals for independent reporting as part of the government's effort to control the war's narrative. As a result, the Second War received less independent media coverage than the First. However, some journalists and human rights defenders, such as Anna Politkovskaya and Nataliya Estemirova, defied these restrictions and provided extensive reporting on abuses.

Norwegian Helsinki Committee

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July 1993
Russian troops made limited incursions into the Chechen Republic

7 August 1999
Chechen and Islamist forces entered Dagestan

September 1999
Russia launched large-scale air and artillery strikes

1 October 1999
Russian ground forces entered the Chechen Republic

Spring 2000
End of the main conventional military campaign

Summer 2000:
Chechen forces shifted to guerrilla warfare. Russian forces began punitive operations ("zachistka"), involving arbitrary detentions, torture, murder, enforced disappearances, persecution and looting

16 April 2009:
Official Russian lifting of the counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya

2014:
Chechen resistance had largely ceased, while a significant share of North Caucasus militants shifted to the Syrian conflict, and later became involved in the war in Ukraine

Armed fighting in Chechnya and Dagestan began in the summer of 1999, and the ground invasion of Chechnya by Russian forces started on 1 October 1999. The end date of the war remains disputed. The Russian side considers it to have ended when the counter-terrorism operation regime in the republic was lifted in April 2009. However, the Chechen side maintains that organised resistance against Russian forces continued until the end of 2014. A significant share of the armed movements in the North Caucasus subsequently migrated to the Syrian conflict, and some later became involved in the war in Ukraine.

To cover the war, journalists required special accreditation from the military authorities, who could control whom they interviewed, which locations they could visit, and what material they could retain. As part of these restrictions, reporters' access often took the form of organised itineraries, with military or state authorities acting as chaperones. These conditions limited the quantity and quality of information leaving Chechnya.

The roles of independent journalists and human rights defenders often overlapped, as both reported abuses that the Russian authorities sought to conceal. Some independent journalists defied censorship by travelling through Chechnya unaccompanied and without official authorisation. They spoke with affected civilians and documented their conditions. Such documentation often exposed allegations of killings, disappearances, torture and other human rights violations, many of which were later upheld in more than 250 judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

In their work, journalists risked being stopped, having their materials seized, detained, and evicted from Chechnya, as well as being exposed to the hazards of active conflict. Between 1999 and 2009, the Natalia Estemirova Documentation Centre (NEDC) recorded 89 journalists as victims of kidnapping, unlawful detention, killings, and enforced disappearances, among other violations.

These include journalists who were particularly vocal in drawing attention to the human rights situation in Chechnya and therefore became high-profile targets of those implicated by their reporting, such as Anna Politkovskaya (1958 – 2006) and Natalia Estemirova (1958 – 2009). Their killings are widely suspected to be linked to their journalism and human rights work, and neither case has been fully investigated.