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The Beslan Syndrome

“Izvestia”, August 28, 2005

Part 1. Envy

Beslan one year after. For a year the town has been wearing mourning garb for the dead children and balancing on the edge of sanity. And every day of the passed year it envied and hated.

A year after the tragedy Beslan is a divided town. The town's people are divided into those who want revenge and those who have resigned themselves to their loss, into those who have received financial compensation for their dead and those who are counting other people's money.

Today's life in Beslan is ruled by hate and envy, but also by compassion, though the latter is harder to find.

“Pity, I and my children we were not at the school during the hostage taking.”

The survived students of the School #1 had been transferred to the School #6 in hope that mingling with the more fortunate children would help relieve them of stress. As the result, it appears, the School #6 students themselves became stressed. Who of the two are in fact “more fortunate” – to this not every Beslan resident would give an unqualified answer.

Sponsored trips abroad and monetary compensations fell upon the children and their parents with the mercifulness of an avalanche. If they did not quite make them enemies of the rest of the Beslan residents, they did provoke a huge amount of envy and resentment. Imagine, some children are leaving for vacations in Canada, while others for their parents' *dachas* to water vegetables. One is getting a gift of an Italian racing bicycle from some agency representing UNESCO, if not NATO, while somebody else has to work hard through the summer vacations selling watermelons at the market to buy one. Add to that the special treatment the survivors were getting in the school all of the last year. Where an average ignoramus gets a C, the teacher

would try and find an excuse to give the former hostage a B. However you try to explain to other children about the psychological trauma, they would still see it as injustice.

«These trips just add to the children's trauma and create free-riding attitudes», fumes Elena Rubaeva, a psychologist with the Beslan's "We are Together" center run by the Red Cross. "First they show them the good life overseas, and the moment the children have got accustomed to it they take them back, back to the memories of blood and death, to the town in the grip of stress."

There are teenage boys hanging around the ruins of the School #1, waiting it seems for journalists to push them an anniversary tale "about those events". Sasha is about 12; he briskly, one could say professionally, tells me about the terrorists, their number and weapons. Looks like he follows the trial of Nurpashi Kulaev, the only captured terrorist. He casually drops a few words about his trips abroad this summer, something like "Once, walking on Champs Elysees...".

He has with him a well groomed Staffordshire terrier on a designer leash and not a worry in his eyes. On September the 3rd he got out of the school unscathed. He got lucky.

Once, at a parents conference at the School #6, the mother of a student dropped in anger, "Pity we were not at the school during the hostage taking, I and my children." Few defend her, but many understand.

“Wrong Money”

“Here, in the North Ossetia, one cannot get a job without paying money to the right people. But a single mother, where would she get them? ” says Murat Bolotaev, a local taxi driver. The terrorist attack on School #1 has solved this problem for some single moms.

In Russia, no victim of a terrorist attack, nor the relatives of a victim, ever received compensations this large, not after the Moscow apartment buildings had been blown up, neither after the “Nord – Ost” tragedy. Never. Here in Beslan the compensation paid was 1 million rubles (*about \$38 000*) for each fatality, 700 000 rubles to a heavily wounded, 500 000 rubles for an injury of a medium severity, 350 000 rubles to a lightly wounded. Besides, the hostages and their relatives received some additional lump sum payments. Summarily, no one received less than 400 000 rubles, even the hostages who had escaped injuries. According to the official data,

about one billion rubles has been transferred to the accounts of Beslan residents, and with no major delays either.

Incidentally, Beslan was not exactly an impoverished town before the terrorist attack, but, as compared with the rest of the North Ossetia, was doing rather well. In the Soviet times its prosperity was based on a large corn mill and an animal feed processing plant, and after perestroika – on a multitude of alcohol producing enterprises, some legal, some not exactly legal. But since the victims of the tragedy began getting compensations the quiet prosperity of the vodka—wine town came to an end.

The former hostages actively began putting money into improvement of their living conditions: began to buy apartments or renovate their houses. As the result, the housing market soared. Housing prices not just rose, they went through the roof. If, before the terrorist attack, the price of a three-room apartment was 700 000 rubles, it almost doubled after the compensations had been paid out. It is not hard to imagine what those who for years had been saving to buy an apartment in Beslan were saying about the victims of the attack.

Beslan is a small town of about 30 000, a town where everybody knows everybody and everybody's business. A new double pane insulated window cannot be hidden from a neighbor, even behind a traditional Caucasian high wall protecting the house.

The sudden wealth, and a million rubles is a lot of money even for the well to do Beslan, that had befallen the former hostages has unexpectedly inflamed the latent hostility of the native Beslan residents toward newcomers, especially the Ossetians that came there in recent years from Georgia.

“First these penniless newcomers swamped us, and now they have built themselves palaces!”, yells old Juliet in answer to my question about the compensations and then points with her impressive Ossetian nose in the direction of a well dressed woman. Quite possibly the woman has never been a hostage and has not bought her dress with the compensation money, but it does not make any difference: her money is “wrong money”.

The “wrong money “is the main subject of conversation in Beslan. A popular topic is cars bought with them. There are many new cars in Beslan. “A thousand cars or even more”, as the rumor has it. “Look at them”, say Beslan men, “they never sat in a cart and now they are driving

foreign made cars”. This “thousand cars” has deprived the town’s people of the peace of mind. They discuss it at home, on the job, in a bus. “How could they? It has not been a year since their children died, but they are already buying themselves cars.”

A visitor would be, without fail, treated to the horror story about a local junky who got compensation for the killed relatives, bought a car and drove it under a truck coming from the opposite direction. The truck tore away the roof of the car together with his head, which was found a hundred meters from the scene. “Nine of these cars have already crashed”. The story has a moral to it: “This is how God punishes those who get rich on the blood of their relatives!”

Other residents, the former hostages and relatives of those who died at the School #1, respond, “If buying a new car and driving it would make feel better some of our men who have lost their children, let them buy the cars and enjoy them. This is much better than drinking or hanging themselves. Who could blame them?”.

“Not a bad deal: they will have both the new children and the money for the children they have lost.”

Nowadays, to denounce the former hostages and their relatives is considered an act of decency in Beslan, and this is what is most indecent about the situation there. They are denounced in the name of morality.

Among the women who lost their children to the terrorist attack some are now pregnant.

“They shouldn’t have!” says a nurse of the local outpatient clinic.

“Why not?”

“Too soon, this is indecent. They need to suffer more.”

“But these women are over 40, they don’t have time for suffering, or they will never have children.”

“Doesn’t matter, they should not have!”

All who died in the terrorist attack have been buried together, next to the old cemetery. They are separated from the old cemetery by a fence, and I wish the survivors were also separated by a fence to protect them from envy of their neighbors.

Incidentally, Beslan men are more tolerant toward the hurried pregnancies of the mothers who lost their children. But to raise the subject with a Beslan woman unaffected by the tragedy is to risk hearing a comment like “Not a bad deal: they will have both the new children and the money for the children they have lost.”

Beslan does make an impression of a not quite sane place, psychiatrically speaking. Everybody blames everybody and has no pity for anybody. This is sad and hard to explain for an outsider. Perhaps this is the consequences of a collective stress.

Women are divided into those who stopped wearing black on the forties day after the funeral, and those who will be wearing the mourning grab until a year passes. The former are accusing the latter of overstating their grief and of unnecessary pathos. The latter are accusing the former of lack of due respect for the tradition and of excessive worldliness, in general.

“For how long one could wear black and make a show of one’s grief? One would think they are the only one who lost their children.”, grumbles an old woman at the cemetery for the victims of the terrorist act. She has just flown in from Moscow to visit the grave of her grandson. In the midst of the ritual dresses and tightly tied black headscarves, the motley ruches on her bosom look like a challenge.

The women from the public organization Mothers of Beslan suspect the North Ossetia government of sending on the sponsored tours abroad children in no way connected neither with Beslan, nor with the School #1.

“You have just to compare the list of hostages with the list of those who have traveled abroad, to Switzerland, for example”, says Emiliya Bzarova. One of her sons, Aslan, was killed and another, Zaur, wounded. It took almost a month to find Aslan’s remains, so she will stop wearing black only by the end of September, when a year since the funerals passes. That somebody from the category “never knew suffering” should enjoy a sponsored trip abroad, which is the exclusive right of her child, makes her very angry.

Inclusion of “outsiders” in the sponsored tours is officially denied by the Vladikavkaz¹ officials. However, off the record, they offer an excuse, “There are so many who want to invite the children. Where do we get this many to fill all the requests?”

The local Department of Education’s staff grumbles about the foreigners who allegedly under the guise of charitable work are just doing make-work to account for the grant money. One of them told me about a trip to Germany made by 250 Beslan children. “They were shown a brick factory and a farm, and that was all in the way of guided tours. They made the children to make their rooms themselves at the hotel. It is time these people leave us alone.” She produces a long list of organization, the bulk of them foreign, which operate rehabilitation programs in Beslan.

Artificial insemination, cloning, adoption, resurrection...

Many of the women, especially those who observe the strict one year mourning period, are reproaching the Beslan men for not having taken revenge for death of their children, revenge in the Caucasian tradition: an eye for an eye. They call them dismissively “our wimpy studs”². Some say that many of the women who are former hostages refuse because of that to sleep with their husbands and that their number is growing. Certainly, these assertions are impossible to verify, for obvious reasons, but some time ago the Ossetian Ministry of Health recommended Beslan psychologists to offer the women who lost their children in the hostage crisis to have artificial insemination, in a Moscow clinic, on the priority basis and free of charge.

“This is unprofessional and irresponsible – say the psychologists - to suggest this to the women in stress, who are not yet ready to adequately process important information. The officials say that artificial insemination would facilitate their rehabilitation. But if insemination fails to achieve results, imagine how it will exacerbate their psychological wounds.”

About a year ago “Izvestia” wrote about the charlatans who were offering Beslan women to resurrect their children, for 39 thousand rubles for a child (the issue from November 26, 2004). Now, a year later, the subject of resurrection competes here in popularity with the subject of monetary compensations.

¹ The capital of the North Ossetia.

² In the original “muzhchinki”, which is “men” plus a diminutive suffix, like boy – boychik. Usually signifies men with no manly qualities other than sexual.

Alla, a Beslan woman, is obsessed with the idea to clone her dead child. They say she is going to spend on it the compensation money and has got in touch with some universities abroad involved with experiments in cloning.

There is another woman who, having identified remains of her daughter and having buried them, still comes out each evening to the yard and waits for her to come home.

The Turaevs family lost two children, a boy and a girl. They decided to have a baby, but the wife could not conceive. Then one day they found a newborn left by their door. First, in confusion, they took the baby to the police, but three days later they came to their senses: this is a gift from God! They took the baby back and it is said that now they could not be happier with their new child. Christmas stories do happen, even in hell.

School #1, the trade mark

There is no peace between teachers and parents of the School #1 either. Two new schools have been built in Beslan by the beginning of the new academic year, for 600 students each. The teachers want one of them given the number one, and they want to put there all the students of the former School #1. The parents are against it and argue that the number one should be get rid of completely, so as not to traumatize the children, and that the children should be able to choose freely which of the two new schools they want to attend.

“This is just a kind of a superstition they have”, dismissively commented just two weeks ago the head of the district Education Department, Zarema Buralova, referring to the parents’ position. However, the indications are that the education officials will take the side of the parents. The two new schools, on Lenin Street and on Comintern Street, will be given numbers 8 and 9.

The local administration however told us, secretly, that superstitions have nothing to do with it. The matter is that the teacher have been fighting to keep the trade mark “School #1” to assure preferential treatment and the flow of humanitarian aid “which will be still arriving addressed to School #1, especially from abroad, for a long time to come yet”.

The fate of the ruins of School #1 has been already practically decided at the meeting of Beslan residents at the Cultural Center: to raze them as soon as the investigation is over and to build

there a church, and to leave the gymnasium standing as a memorial. Currently the decision is going through the approval process within the town administration.

The impression is that the clinical picture of the Beslan malady is, if anything, getting worse with time. Victims of the terrorist attack are looking for ways to atone for their guilt of sudden enrichment. Some give part of their compensation money to orphanages. The brothers Totievs' household has chosen another way of atonement. They lost six children, a boy and five girls, have the largest common grave of the cemetery and nothing to be ashamed of. But they are paving the street on which their house stands, paving it for the benefit of everybody. Their motives could very well be noble. But their neighbors still are busy doing arithmetic in their heads: they multiply one million by six all the time.

The Beslan Syndrome

“Izvestia”, August 29, 2005

Part 2. Obsession

“Izvestia” continue with the series of articles on psychological traumas with which Beslan lives today, a year after the tragedy. One of the manifestations of the “Beslan syndrome” is obsessive behavior of the mothers who lost their children. Whether "obsessive behavior" should be used here as a medical or a colloquial term, it does not make much difference for the powers-that-be against whom the brunt of the anger of Mothers of Beslan is directed. Mothers of Beslan have become a unique socio-political phenomenon. This organization cannot be outlawed; its rallies cannot be dispersed. Mothers of Beslan cannot be bought and cannot be silenced. One could try to discredit them or to ignore them, but neither has worked so far.

"We are not afraid of anybody, and the authorities know that."

For the last half a year, this is from the moment of inception, Mothers of Beslan have been pressing for a meeting with the Russian President. All they wanted was to tell him what they thought was wrong with the official investigation of the terrorist attack. However, Moscow never answered them. Then, a week before the scheduled commemoration events dedicated to the first anniversary of the tragedy of the first three days of September 2004, the government of the North Ossetia transmitted to Mothers of Beslan an invitation from President Putin to meet him in Kremlin on September the 2nd. This put the Beslan women before the choice: whether to spend this grievous anniversary by the graves of their children or at the President's residence.

It was no secret that Mothers of Beslan had planned a series of public actions to coincide with the anniversary. Sussana Dudueva, the head of the committee, informed “Izvestia” about their plans as early as the mid-August. So, from the point of view of the authorities, there was no better way to neutralize its most active critics than to have them invited on these days to the Kremlin. Should Mothers of Beslan accept the invitation and leave for Moscow, the commemoration would proceed according to the official scenario: solemnly and without

politically damaging excesses. But if the women refuse the invitation and organize public disturbances in Beslan, they could be accused of unwillingness to enter into a civilized dialog.

Mothers of Beslan are a thorn in the back of the authorities. They ask embarrassing questions at the trial of Nurpashi Kulaev, the only, as claimed by the investigation, survived terrorist: the questions about the real number of hostages and of the terrorists, about the non-conventional weapons used, about clumsy operation of the operation headquarters. They demand to make the top government officials, including the President, answer for allowing the terrorist attack to happen, and to determine the measure of responsibility each one of them bears. They cannot be dispersed by police batons, because no one beats women in the Caucasus. They cannot be outlawed by a decree of the Ministry of Justice, because they are victims of incompetence of the authorities, and public opinion will be always on their side. Mothers of Beslan cannot be wiped out, but can be discredited.

“At some point, there had been leaflets distributed all over the North Ossetia, in which I was called a devil, a black woman, a witch.”, say Susanna Dudieva. “They wrote I bring troubles wherever I go. Rumors are always circulating that the opposition uses our committee to bring down the republic’s government. They say I was given...let me think what was it...yes, an apartment in Moscow, two apartments and a shop in Vladikavkaz, a hotel in Rostov, ...and something else. But they did not write that my son died in the terrorist attack. They thought we would drop everything and start investigating who had concocted this lies. But we have more important things to do. And the main thing is to assure objective investigation of the events.”

“You are not concerned with your reputation then?”

“We don’t care about reputation. There can be nothing worse than what has already happened to us. We are not afraid of anybody, and the authorities know that. Zalina here (she nods in the direction of one of the committee activists), she lost her whole family. Emma (she nods in another direction), also lost her family: her husband and two sons. There are women who lost three or four children. What else do they have to lose? The people who know no better, they think that a new car or an apartment could make a mother forget her dead child. No money can buy us. Though I can tell you I was never offered any. (She laughs somewhat artificially.) Nevertheless, they do try to clamp our mouths: heads of the enforcement agencies, the Prosecutor Office, the authorities.”

“We need to form a women battalion, if the man cannot take revenge.”

We talk with Susanna Dudieva at the office of the Mothers of Beslan committee. Perhaps ‘office’ is too grand a word. Actually, this is a small apartment in a “khrushchevka” type building³, the apartment owned by one of the Beslan mothers. This is a ground floor apartment with street entrance and the door that stays opened wide all day long. It is furnished with a table, chairs, and some office equipment. Mobile phones ring incessantly. All these bring to mind revolution headquarters on the eve of uprising. Every one of the mothers there is busy.

One sends an e-mail, “Does anybody know the address of the President’s administration, I have forgotten”.

Another calls the office of the President’s representative in the Southern Federal District, Dmitriy Kozak. “Kozak is on the scheduled vacation leave”, she announces loudly and with venom in her voice.

“They always have everything scheduled and planned. The only thing is we are never included in their plans”, comes a remark from the corner where they are sorting pictures of the perished hostages.

Another committee’s activist talks to an Austrian journalist.

“What do you consider your main achievement?”

“How should I put it... You see, after the tragedy we all went through it is kind of difficult to talk about successes.”

All the activists are in black: many Ossetian women mourn for a year from the day of the funeral. The uniform of grief.

Today is a special day for the staff of the psychological help center “We are Together” run by the Red Cross: for the first time ever they are being visited by Mothers of Beslan. Most of the

³ “khrushchevka” – a low quality standard design apartment building. They had been erected all over the country in realization of the state housing program initiated by Nikita Khrushchev, a Soviet leader.

committee members, unlike other Beslan women, believe that they don't need psychological help.

"They never talk about their psychological problems, only about politics, about the unsuccessful search for those guilty in the death of their children", say Elena Rubaeva, a psychologist. "We see aggression that cannot be vented in combination with them choosing the role of victim, once and for all. I am positive this is not what they need for internal rehabilitation. They are constantly attending the court hearings [of the Kulaev case] and relive each time the experiences of the past September. They try and support each other within the committee, and the committee has become for them a narcotic, but this narcotic cannot get them out of the stress."

We, the journalists, enter the psychologists' office to find Mothers of Beslan, a circle of twenty women in black, in a heated conversation.

"We need to form a women battalion, if the man cannot take revenge."

"Right", agrees another woman, "I score 48 out of 50".

When they see us, they switch to Ossetian, but then back to Russian.

"All women of the Caucasus should unite against the war and the terror", says one, for our benefit, I think.

"20 thousand children died in Chechnya during the war. They are no different than we are", says another.

"They are no different than we are" - one hears this a lot in conversations with Beslan women, and there is more to this assertion than may appear at first.

"Who is a 'mother of Beslan'?" asks a Chechen acquaintance of mine. He used to run fuel trucks from Chechnya by the way of Beslan, but now he feels it is too dangerous. His answer: "She is no different from a woman *shakhid*⁴, only she doesn't wear the explosive belt. Lives of the both have been maimed by the Russian government. The only difference is that one has had

⁴ A suicide bomber

her brother or husband killed by the *federals*⁵ and another has had her child killed by the *federals*. Put them side by side and you couldn't tell them apart: one wears a Chechen *khidzhab*⁶ and another is dressed in the Ossetian mourning clothes. And they have the same eyes, dog's eyes."

Mothers of Beslan demands are no less fanciful than were the demands of the terrorists who captured School #1. Which of the two is more unrealistic: "to make Chechnya an independent member of CIS⁷" or "to make the Russian authorities tell the truth about the Beslan tragedy, under the pressure from the leaders of the Western countries"? Difficult to say.

"We don't trust anybody"

The investigators working on the terrorist attack case had been denying for a long time that during storming of School #1 the military used tanks and "Shmel" (*Bumblebee*) flamethrowers⁸, which, as Mothers of Beslan claim, killed most of the hostages who died there. Later they had to acknowledge their use, mainly because of the evidence collected by Beslan residents: they presented the investigators with tank ammunition trays and launcher tubes. They were grudgingly admitted as evidence, with various reservations. Thus, chairman of the parliamentary investigation commission on Beslan, Aleksandr Torshin, claimed in an interview that one of the launcher tubes presented to them was not military issue.

"Why quibble?" wrote Mothers of Beslan to Torchin, in indignation. "Call every discovered "Shmel" tube, every tank ammunition tray, and every grenade launcher tube "not military issue" and be done with it. But we have foreseen this turn of event and held back a "Shmel" tube and several grenade launcher tubes [to prove their authenticity].

Perhaps you believe that somebody has organized mass production of these armaments here, or that Beslan women bake them in their kitchens? What then your promise of objective investigation and your assurances that you will never have a reason to be ashamed to look us in the eyes are worth? It looks like we hinder you in your enjoying your luxurious life."

"Are there people among those in power whom you trust?" I ask Susanna Dudieva.

⁵ Federal forces, forces of the Russian Federation.

⁶ A black headscarf covering most of the face.

⁷ Commonwealth of Independent States, the organization uniting some former Soviet republics.

⁸ "Flamethrowers" is perhaps a misnomer. "Shmel" is a missile launcher delivering an incendiary or a thermo-baric charge (a vacuum bomb).

“There are no such people. We don’t trust anybody”.

This is the main conclusion one comes to having become acquainted with Mothers of Beslan: anybody representing the powers-that-be is their enemy. Should they accept the invitation and go to see the President, it would be to see the face of the enemy.

Mothers of Beslan do not enjoy universal support of Beslan residents. Some consider their activities worthy of approval, but they are in minority. In the eyes of an average Beslanian, they are discredited by the compensations they have received for dead or wounded children, which they allegedly spend lavishly on senseless luxuries like cars and vacations abroad.

“No one of us was abroad even once in the whole year”, responds with indignation the co-chair of the committee, Anneta Gadieva. “They forget that the compensations might not even cover medical care for the afflicted children.” She adds that in Moscow, where she visited recently, “every other car on the street costs as much as the compensation for one lost child”.

Besides accusations of spending the “blood money”, Mothers of Beslan are reproached for lack of consistency and decisiveness, not always without grounds.

For one, their attitude toward “fathers of Beslan” is incoherent: on the one hand the women pride themselves on having prevented the armed ethnic conflict [between Ossetians and Ingushes], and, on the other, they reproach their husbands and brothers that death of their children has not been revenged.

“If a child had been killed: first suffering for three days and then returned to his father in pieces, [and the father did nothing], then the father has no rights to produce any more children, ever.” says Susanna Dudieva calmly.

Or take another example. Once Mothers of Beslan decided to walk on foot to Vladikavkaz to protest lack of objectivity in the investigation of the terrorist attack. But they got no further than the nearest intersection before turning back. They explained they did not like the way some passersby looked at them and what they said. Put a bad eye on them, so to speak. Many in Beslan were surprised that Mothers of Beslan could be stopped that easily. This is why not many in Beslan took them seriously when the women were threatening a foot march on Moscow to press for a meeting with the President.

Still, how did it happen that two hundred Ossetian women united by mother's grief had become a real force, the force which even the federal authorities have to reckon with? What gave rise to this socio-political phenomenon? The answer is phenomenally simple: the government's lies.

“If only it would cost them a single star off their epaulets.”

“They said that our forces started firing flamethrowers into the gymnasium when there was no hostages left there.” says Susanna Dudieva. “But what about the dead and the wounded? Were not they hostages too? And where were they?”

The key word here is “our”. This is striking that for her the people who have killed her son are still “our”. But the authorities take it for granted and make no use of it, and do everything they can to turn “our” into “their”.

“There is footage shot by the Ministry for Emergency Situations, taken at 7.45 A.M., September 4, as the time stamp in the corner of the frame shows. I see there my son, propped against the gymnastic ladder on the wall, dead. Next to him there should be his cousin, Alla, her coeds, who were our neighbors. But some of them were found only five days later, some - ten days later, yet others – a month later. Why? Because they could not be identified. They were burned as if by the blowtorch.

Or take the boy, Khasan. His mother found him on the 5th, dead, had identified him. All he had was a bullet wound in the leg, and nothing else: no other bullet or bomb fragment wounds. But she finds him burned from head to toe. What does it mean? Perhaps he got burned while he was unconscious.”

“Who will answer for that?” asks Emiliya Bzarova. “Do you know how did my son look like when I found him? Nicely roasted.”

Emiliya Bzarova is not insane, and neither does she want to be shocking. This is how she remembers her son. She is a quintessential committee woman in whose heart the despair has turned into obsession, into hunger for truth and for revenge.

“Why is that that there have been charges brought against the heads of the Beslan police for criminal negligence in letting the terrorists into the school building, while heads of the operation headquarters, the big brass, have not been charged with anything? Did not they commit criminal negligence by killing my son?”

The same hunger for truth and for revenge finds its expression, for example, in the letter by Mothers of Beslan to Aleksandr Torshin, chairman of the parliamentary investigation commission, “Perhaps it would suit you fine if we leave the country, but even then we would continue searching for the truth, through international bodies. It just cannot be that death of so many should bring only rewards and awards and no punishment.”

“If only it would cost them a single star off their epaulets, if only they would not be rewarded for a bungled operation, if only they would just feel ashamed before us...” says Susanna Dudieva, as if chanting an incantation. “We are not even calling for bringing criminal charges. Let them at least name the guilty, and then it could be decided whether to prosecute them. We are not bloodthirsty; we don’t want anybody put behind bars. The guilty must be named so that, should the same, God forbid, happen again, the likes of Patrushev and Nurgaliev⁹ would know that they will be held responsible before the law.”

As to the charges that the committee has connections with the opposition, they are not groundless. Once, Mothers of Beslan even joined forces with the United Ossetia party, the main opposition movement in the North Ossetia, to bring down the then president of the republic, Aleksandr Dzasokhov. This happened after the authorities refused to authorize their rally, “Women against Terror”, they wanted to conduct in the center of Vladikavkaz. Later, President Dzasokhov resigned, for which Women of Beslan take some credit. Lately, it seems, the committee has been merging with the opposition in a demonstrative fashion. Thus, their interests at the trial of Nurpashi Kulaev are now being represented by Taimuraz Chedzhemov, a lawyer and the former head of the Central Executive Committee of the North Ossetia, one of the most active opposition figures in the republic.

Conceivably, given the right conditions, Mothers of Beslan could evolve into a real political opposition force, especially considering that the authorities, time and time again, feed their dissident attitudes.

⁹ Heads of the Federal Security Service and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (an equivalent of the Ministry of Police), correspondingly.

The Beslan Syndrome

“Izvestia”, August 30, 2005

Part 3. Hatred

A year after the tragedy, Beslan is still brimming with hatred. Hatred for the Ingushes, who are viewed as either terrorists or their accomplices. Hatred toward the authorities, who have not done everything in their power to save the hostages. Women’s hatred for men for not having taken revenge for death of their children. And the reciprocal hatred of the men toward the women for their endless mourning. But there is no clear target for revenge. They cannot bring revenge on all the Ingushes, because the government would not let them, and besides the urge is gone: they understand now that somehow it would be wrong. And so far they have not had much success with taking revenge on the powers-that-be. As the result, Beslan residents are stewing in their own hatred.

“How would we be any better than the terrorists?”

I am telling Murat Bolotaev, a local resident, about the women’s grievances against Beslan men. On September the 3rd, Murat had been carrying out children from the school building, under the terrorists’ fire. He was then on TV a lot, and people would come up to him and ask, “Murat, were there your children in the building?” His children were not there, but he did it because he is a real man.

Murat gets so angry his hands leave the steering wheel of his car he is driving, “Don’t they know what people say about them? They say they wear black in Beslan and change it to fancy dresses when go abroad!”

After a while he calms down, “But to tell the truth, we still feel guilty, because there is a grain of truth in what the women say: we have not revenged ourselves. Now I feel ashamed to visit our countrymen in Russia. If I tell them that I am from Beslan, they would ask, “Is it where your people had their asses whipped and just swallowed it?””

Beslan men noticeably have more difficulty coping with consequences of the terrorists attack than do women and children. Revenge must be taken, but on whom? On Ingushetia, from where

the terrorists came? “Let’s say we put some men together, go there. Whom do we kill there? Women and children again?” says Murat Bolotaev. “How would we be any better than the terrorists?”

Revenge must be taken, but the authorities would not allow it. A large village of Nogir stands on the road from Vladikavkaz to Beslan. Most of the villagers there have their roots in the South Ossetia, where people are believed to be more temperamental and warlike. In the first days after the tragedy it was Nogir villagers who were most vocal in calling for revenge. They even started to form armed units, each 20 men strong, and were enlisting volunteers just outside the local cultural center. There was much shouting and oath taking, but soon, it was said, the Nogir activists had started receiving visits from men in civilian clothes. One of the activists, a distinguished citizen of Nogir, had been told by them, “You are doing well, are not you? But everything could change, think about it.” The activists decided they didn’t want changes in their lives, and the idea of revenge disappeared into the sand.

“There will be war here, anyway, sooner or later”

Nevertheless, the rumor is that some of Beslan people are covertly seeking revenge. At least, there is an active search going on for the escaped terrorists, and nobody in Beslan doubts that some did escape, despite the official claim to the contrary. But, so far, it seems no one of the Beslan dead has been “exchanged for” as they call it here, or, in this small town, it would have been already widely known.

Meanwhile, the image of Vitaliy Kaloev (an Ossetian charged with murder of a Swiss air traffic controller guilty of causing an air collision that killed Kaloev’s wife and two children) is haunting every Beslan man. A rare Ossetian woman would fail to mention him as an edifying example, the example they expect Beslan men to follow when the year long mourning is over. “I have to disappoint you: the story about Caucasian woman throwing a white kerchief on the ground to stop fight between Caucasian men is just a fairy tale for tourists and journalists” tells me a Beslan mother who lost her child in the terrorist attack.

There is a story enthusiastically told in Beslan about a former hostage, the only one who refused the compensation money. I failed to find him either in the official documents or through the grapevine. Perhaps he exists only as an embodiment of hope in existence of human altruism. But

the commentary the story gets is far from idealistic: “He should have taken the money and contracted a killer to bump off a couple of Ingushes”.

Almost everybody in Beslan view Ingushes as terrorists. Immediately after the tragic events at School #1 the shuttle traders from Ingushetia and Chechnya stopped using Beslan airport for their flights to Turkey. The Chechen students have disappeared from Vladikavkaz colleges, they had transferred themselves out rather than chance it there. “Anyway, there were never many Ingush students in our city”, says Sarmat, a graduate student at the Vladikavkaz medical school. He philosophizes that the Christian North Ossetia faces imminent expansion of its exclusively Muslim neighbors.

No denying, the Beslan tragedy has significantly complicated the already tense Ossetian – Ingush relations. It is a major problem to find a taxi driver in the North Ossetia to take you to Ingushetia. “Not for any money”, would be a usual answer. Any driver you ask would make a scared face, “What, just like that? Without protection?” The best you can hope for is that the driver would call a colleague from Ingushetia to pick you up at the Chermenskiy circle, at the police post, on the administrative border between the two republics. There he would pass you on to the Ingush driver telling him, “You had better watch it, because I have your plate number written down”, and laughing an evil laugh.

Until recently, Elza Baskaeva was the editor of a Beslan newspaper “Zhizn Pravoberezhya” (*The Right-bank Chronicle*). She drones on about how the life here is returning to normalcy, how the sounds of a normal life are returning: here children were discovered laughing, there dogs, which allegedly had been silent since the terrorist attack, were heard barking. Soon the year long mourning will be over and there will be music on the streets. But then she says suddenly with irritation in her voice, “Anyway, there will be war here, sooner or later. I have already sent my daughter off to Moscow.”

According to information available to “Izvestia”, it was donations from the reserve funds of the Federation’s republics, provinces, and regions that formed the charitable fund from which compensations to former hostages and their families has been paid. The donations were on the order of 15-20 million rubles. There is no need to guess who might have ordered payments from these funds: the only person who could have done it was the President. It looks like the situation in the North Caucasus was so serious at that moment that it warranted such an uncharacteristic

for Russian authorities way of dealing with it: to douse the rising flames of the inter-ethnic conflict with heavy semi-voluntary donations.

Incidentally, despite the wide held believe that the foreigners have been incredibly generous toward Beslan residents, the bulk of the charitable fund that paid out the compensations was formed by Russian sources, private as well.

“I was silly: I pinned my hopes on the state”

The Beslan teenagers who for some reason have escaped attention of foreign charities are playing “shoot-‘em-up” at the local Internet-café “Block Post”. After the terrorist attack it has become a very popular place. It is done in militaristic style: body armor on the wall, bullet perforated and smeared with fake blood, metal ammunition boxes, war helmets, and other military paraphernalia on the floor.

The ruined School #1 is covered with graffiti. Its walls look like pages of a giant condolences book. Most of the inscriptions are desperate appeals to the dead children to forgive for failing to protect them. The atmosphere of guilt is overwhelming.

There is nothing on the walls about the Ingushes, but instead there are a few politically correct to the point of annoyance slogans wishing death to some abstract terrorists. The angry invectives against the powers-that-be have disappeared, which is strange. As I remember, in the first days after the tragedy the names of President Putin and of Aleksandr Dzasokhov, then president of the North Ossetia, figured on the walls no less often than references to the terrorists, and in about the same context. It appears the graffiti have been edited by a sure hand: here and there there are patches of gray paint and over them there are written inscriptions referring to Lidiya Tsalieva, director of School #1. Most of the inscriptions are in the same hand, and the most innocuous of them read, “Lidiya, you are a bitch, you are guilty in the death of our children.” It looks like somebody has tried to redirect people’s anger: to cover up the two presidents, in more ways than one, and to substitute for them one director. In this connection, people recall workers with cans of paint loitering about the school after the tragedy. Then, nobody understood what they were doing there, and people had too much on their minds to heed them.

The edited graffiti, meanwhile, have sown the seeds of hate. Director Tsalieva is now blamed for everything: that she let the terrorists into the school, that she stashed weapons for them under the floor boards. It does not make any difference that she has not been charged with anything, that

she is a witness in the case, that she was almost the last one evacuated, wounded, from the building, that there were her grandchildren and her sister, Zara, among the hostages, and that Zara went almost blind as the result of a wound.

“Had she been really in cahoots with the terrorists, wouldn’t she have found a way to warn them [her relatives] somehow?” asks Zoya Sugarova, a German language teacher. She has worked at School #1 for 20 years, knows Lidiya Tsalieva well, and is convinced she would never become an accomplice to terrorists.

The first rule of disinformation: the more preposterous the accusation, the easier people could be made to believe it. This is how simple it proved to create instantly an accomplice to terrorists out of an honorary citizen, a distinguished teacher of flawless reputation, Lidiya Tsalieva.

Larisa Sokaeva lost her only daughter, the 12 years old Albina. On September 1, leaving for school, Albina left on the table her toys and a note for her grandmother, “Don’t put it away, I’ll be back soon.” A year later, the toys and the note still lie on the table. Larisa’s husband has been ill since his daughter died; Albina’s grandmother has died having been hit by a car.

Today, for the first time since the events of the last September, Larisa came to the school grounds. We enter the ruins of gymnasium together with a group of local people. The first things to catch the eye are colorful advertising banners of a popular TV channel and a radio station laid over gymnastic benches. The banners bear calligraphic expressions of solidarity with residents of Beslan. Somebody next to me mutters, “Nitwits”. Larisa pulls the banners from the benches, crumples them and throws into a half burned closet.

Larisa makes a visible effort to reflect on the events of the last September: “I was silly. I thought the terrorist would sit us in the classrooms, give us food and drink, would come to terms with the authorities, and let us go. I relied on the state for help.”

“I did not know there is still somebody who does”, I interject.

“Perhaps I was the last one. You know, I was then teaching law at the continued education courses for railroad personnel. While my daughter and I were sitting there with bombs hanging over our heads, and while we were waiting for the government to free us, I kept repeating to myself the words from a text book that the President is the guarantor of the Constitution. But it

proved to be either a bad textbook, or a bad President. He had better not come here for the anniversary”, she concludes dryly.

“The firemen were scared and would not go near the school until we gave them beating.”

Here, in the gymnasium we meet a young man, with hair gone completely white, Vadim Fidarov, a grandson of the former director of School #1, Tarkan Sabanov, a Beslan legend. Tarkan Sabanov had worked at the school for 27 years, he had built the gymnasium, and has died here.

Vadim feels at home among the ruins of the school and carries himself with the flare of a professional guide. He shows us the place where the “pedal man” sat, the terrorist who was holding his foot on the detonator switch. He squints his eyes at the nearby five storey apartment building and suggests we do the same. He explains that this is a “dead zone”: the “pedal man” could not have been shot by a snipe shooter firing from the building.¹⁰

“See these burned patches on the floor? This is where there were no bodies on the floor during the fire”, he says in a didactic manner. There are not many burned patches on the gymnasium floor.

"And this hole in the wall the men had beaten through with a barbell to bring the fire hose in: the fireman did not have a hose long enough. In fact, what they did not have enough were brains. They had three days to fill water tanks of the fire trucks and they did not. Imagine, the firemen were so scared they would not go near the school until we gave them beating. They were saying they did not have protective clothing, and in any case it was not their business to fight fire dodging bullets. They should be put on trial.”

Vadim had been always carrying with him keys to the adjacent small gym, a weights room. He still has them on the key chain hanging from his belt. He used to spend evenings there with his friends, often staying till late.

¹⁰ According to a version of the events, the storming began after the terrorist on the detonator switch was shot by a snipe shooter causing explosion of a bomb.

The night to September the 1st went as usual. First they pumped iron, then chatted, and left after 1 A.M.

“Did you have an impression there were strangers in the building? Because some say that one group of the terrorists had sneaked into the school some days in advance of the hostage taking.”

“It is impossible: we would have noticed. If anybody did get in, it could have been only late at night or early in the morning of the 1st.”

Vadim shows us a picture of the Beslan basketball men’s team taken in the gymnasium of School #1, before it has been ruined. Vadim runs his finger over faces of the team: this one has lost his sister, this one – his mother, this one himself died here. His finger stops at the face of a young man. “Him”, says Vadim, “he is the only Beslan policeman who stood up to the terrorist. (He says his name.) He took down one of them with his police issue handgun in the first minutes of the attack.

“Just don’t publish his name, just in case, because they might try to get even. Though his chiefs had blown his identity long ago. He should have got recognized as a hero, but instead they are pestering him with an investigation: how did he know they were terrorists, why he did not fire warning shots, how come he carried his weapon off duty? This is how it is always with us: putting down the best.”

Even on September the 2nd there was still chaos; there was no unified operation command to speak of.”

A middle-aged woman, Zara, joins the conversation. She had been among the hostages, but on September the 2nd she was released to Ruslan Aushev, together with her little nephew¹¹. Zara recalls the events following her release.

“They began taking me to various special services: FSB, the Alpha group, then something else. They were snatching me from each other, as a valuable witness. One investigator, say from FSB, is taking my testimonies, while a guy from Alpha is breathing down his neck: “Hurry, we need

¹¹ The terrorists released to Ruslan Aushev, the former president of Ingushetia, 26 people, including 15 babies.

her too.” And the first answers, “You will wait. We are not sorting paper clips here.” Though it looked like what in fact they were doing.

“I saw the security operatives looking at some drawings and I realized from their conversation that they had taken them for the floor plans of School #1. But I could see that those were floor plans of some other school, because I went to School #1 and knew the place well. I told them, “You are mistaken!” And they said this was the only floor plan they had. So I had to get them the right floor plans through a friend of mine.

“In short, even on September the 2nd there was still complete chaos around the school, each service pulling the blanket over to their own side of the bed; there was no unified operation command to speak of. So, the storming of the school could not have ended any other way but in tragedy.”

Murat Kaboev, a former submariner, is writing a book about the Beslan tragedy, about the truth of it. There is a stream of eyewitnesses visiting him, sharing with him information and recollections. Listening to them he often cannot hold back tears, though he has not lost any relatives there. Recently, after a court session of the Nurpashi Kulaev trial, he was visited by a man who lost his child at School #1. The man told him, “I want to burn myself, because we will never get justice”. Since then, Murat Kaboev tries hard not to shed a tear.

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