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When *we* are the violent: The Chechen Islamist guerrillas' discourse on their own armed actions

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decades, the strategic profile of the discourse with which wars are narrated has been reinforced. This discourse has also varied in the light of a recent – and alleged – peace culture permeating Western societies. Whereas the war discourse in Russia during the Second Russian-Chechen War has been widely studied, this has not been the case of the rhetoric of the Chechen Islamist guerrillas. The aim of this paper is to contribute to bridging this gap in the academic literature on the North Caucasus, employing to this end a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of a selection of texts posted by the Kavkaz Center (KC) news agency. On the basis of this analysis, it can be concluded that one of the main discursive strategies revolved around the construction of an “us” embodying the Chechen victims of the initial aggression in a conflict provoked by the Russian “other”.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, an alleged peace culture has apparently been established, which, in part, has modified the way of waging and legitimizing war (Nikken, 2011), making this the last political resort. “Material interest, conflict over scarce resources, or simple intergroup hatred has not been sufficient to legitimate political violence in our times” (Hollander, 2013: 518). Generally speaking, that legitimacy has to be sought in other parts, which in itself challenges the moral ideal that violence is not admissible under any circumstances (Tarín Sanz, 2015). One of those “other parts” revolves around legitimate defense or

self-defense,¹ extenuating circumstances that, nowadays, appear as two of the foremost narratives for justifying political violence to global public opinion. This last notion – that of presenting the event to others – is essential in just war theory (O’Boyle, 2002), which analyzes precisely the shift of the ideal of previous justice – the need for territorial expansion, amassing greater wealth, empire-building, etc. – toward another contemporary one in which it is crucial to bear in mind public opinion. Beyond the normative processes that regulate the internal and international relations of countries, even way beyond whatever those intervening directly in a conflict actually do, the moral issue of war is established by the opinions of humanity as a whole

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¹ For a more in-depth legal debate on legitimate defense, see Wright (2008).

(Walzer, 2015). The reasons behind, or acts of, war are not as important as what is imagined by the body of citizens. That is why propaganda, the discourse employed to offer an account of war, is one of the key elements of military success (Miller, 2004).

In this respect, there is plenty of literature that has sought to unravel the discourses revolving around political violence.² But one of the most resorted to has to do with the collective yearning for a superior or horizontal order, objectively better than that which is being contested. This social, and personal, benefit is central to contemporary just war doctrine and has been used by organizations such as IRA, for which the redefinition of frontiers would improve the lot of the Irish people (Macfarlane, 1990); the North American far right, who regard themselves as a genuinely native vanguard that will transport the nation back in time to an idealized past of racial purity (Barkun, 2000); and the North American government itself during the Kosovo War, whose military success was narrated as a victory of all in pursuit of human rights, thanks to which the world would be a safer place (Stables, 2003). According to O'Boyle (2002, 25), this war frame is based on consequentialist theory, "the doctrine that says that the right act in any given situation is the one that will produce the best overall outcome in terms of the identified end." Namely, there is an ultimate purpose that is just (or more equitable than the current design) and which makes political violence against those who stand in the way of a better world admissible. Using the aforementioned cases, it is *just* to kill the English to attain a country where we can live happily; it is *just* to kill colored people to restore our nation to the peaceful racial harmony enjoyed by our ancestors; it is *just* to kill Serbs to protect the world.

But, in addition to resorting to violence to reach a loftier goal, it must also be adequately employed. The actors of an armed conflict must contend that this was the last resort, after having exhausted all other alternatives for a peaceful settlement and, moreover, that its use was responsible. This is the reason why the manuals of the Animal Liberation Front scrupulously establish that the only morally acceptable acts of violence are those carried out against the property of whoever is directly involved in animal exploitation, taking special care not to harm any animal – human or otherwise (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2016). Or, from a different perspective, it is the same reason why jihadist groups go to great lengths to justify martyrdom – the procedure and not the outcome – on the basis of the sacred texts (Slavicek, 2008). In the first case, the source of legitimacy lies in resorting to proportional violence and only against blatant aggressors. In the second case, it resides in a divine and, therefore, absolute code.

² In this work, political violence is understood "as the use or threatened use of physical coercion to achieve political ends. Such actual or threatened acts of coercion are, in the present definition, carried out by identifiable persons, whether they are acting as agents of the state or as members of non-state bodies opposing the state. Political violence is here understood as the use (actual or threatened) of physical coercion to achieve a change in the nature of the political order, or (when carried out by agents of the state) to defend that order in its existing form" (Schwarzmantel, 2010, 218). Therefore, criminal or structural violence is excluded, in spite of the fact that it also responds to profoundly political reasons.

With respect to the main context of this paper, some studies have addressed the war discourse during the Russian-Chechen Wars, particularly the second war. As a rule, they coincide in underscoring that one of the central arguments employed by the Kremlin to justify its intervention was to place the conflict in the context of the North American War on Terror (Foxall, 2010; Lapidus, 2002; Russell, 2005; Vázquez Liñán, 2005, 2009). According to these analyses, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks the administration of Vladimir Putin experienced one of the periods of greatest rapprochement with its US counterpart, thanks, among other aspects, to its support for the war in Afghanistan and by presenting the Chechen conflict as yet another front of that battle. Thus, the narrative of the global threat to the West – or to the Christian world – with the twin towers collapsing in the background, was a frame central to Russia's war discourse:

The event that occurred in the US today goes beyond national borders. It is a brazen challenge to the whole humanity, at least to civilized humanity. And what happened today is added proof of the relevance of the Russian proposal to pool the efforts of the international community in the struggle against terrorism, that plague of the 21st century. Russia knows at first hand what terrorism is. So, we understand as well as anyone the feelings of the American people. Addressing the people of the United States on behalf of Russia I would like to say that we are with you, we entirely and fully share and experience your pain. We support you (Putin, 2001).

Nonetheless, there are remarkable shortcomings in the study of the Chechen discourse of justification, with the exception of Radnitz (2006), who analyzes the progressive "Islamization" of Russian and Chechen institutional language between the first and second war, and how religion gradually played a more important role in war rhetoric. This progressive "Islamization" had a special presence in the period studied (2001–2005): the previous moment of the institutional transition from pseudo-secular Chechen nationalism (the Maskhadov government) to pan-Caucasian jihadism (the Caucasus Emirate). It is thus a period in which the majority of the Chechen population were hesitant about the application of *sharia* (Akaev, 2014), and in which the propagandists – like Movladi Udugov – who during the first war spoke Russian and considered Western reporters as potential allies, during the second war began to employ a hostile jihadist discourse (Swirszcz, 2009).

This paper intends to contribute to partially filling that lacuna. The general objective is to analyze the arguments employed by the incipient Chechen jihadist guerrillas to present their own political violence in an acceptable light, during the government of Aslan Maskhadov. To this end, the English language version of the website of the Kavkaz Center (KC), recognized as the chief mouthpiece of these armed groups, was chosen as the object of study. The selected sample comprises news items dealing with the four violent events with greater coverage in the KC between 2001 and 2005: the storming of the Dubrovka Theater in 2002, with the subsequent death of dozens of hostages; the campaign of terrorist attacks sparked by the passing of the "pro-Russian" Chechen constitution in 2003; the assassination of the "pro-Russian"

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