

# Comparative analysis of public opinion and hostage attack victims' attitudes: evidence from Beslan, September 2004

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How does an extreme situation, such as a violent attack, impact political opinions of the affected population? Using original data from the hostage crisis in the North Ossetian town of Beslan, this article explores the differences and similarities in attitudes towards the key social and political issues between the directly affected and the general populations of the town. The study was constructed as a quasi-natural experiment of a rare kind, since the attack generated directly affected and unaffected populations living in the same society. Our research shows that despite deep distrust toward both the national and regional government, respondents still indicated a relatively low inclination to engage in civic activity in opposition to the state authorities as a result of the attack. The results of the study throw light on the question of why the Beslan attack did not become a catalyst for change in North Ossetia: absence of political opposition disempowers the general population and prevents social change from happening even under highly stressful circumstances. The inconclusiveness of the official investigation into the Beslan attack may, however, leave these tragic events open to future politicisation.

**Keywords:** hostages, North Ossetia, opposition, grievances, political control, natural experiment.

## Introduction

This article provides a retrospective analysis of how the hostage crisis in Beslan in 2004 affected public attitudes in North Ossetian society.<sup>2</sup> Unique survey data was used that was collected soon after the crisis in North Ossetia among hostage victim and non-victim populations. The survey was complemented with qualitative data sources, focus groups with experts and the general public, to improve the internal validity of the survey. The survey results were further compared to ensuing events. Comparing victim and non-victim attitudes to political and social issues faced by North Ossetians allowed us to provide a rare glimpse into the effects of psychological trauma, in a setting analogous to a natural experiment (Varga and Zhornyak 2005).

The tragic events of 1-3 September 2004 in School №1 gave the little town of Beslan in North Ossetia instant prominence worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Over 300 people died in the hostage crisis, most of them children. The terrorist attack shocked the international community and a large number of Russian organisations, institutions, NGOs, foundations, private firms and individuals provided help to the victims in the days that immediately followed the ending of the school siege. The hostage drama in Beslan ultimately affected North Ossetia and Russia as a whole.

The crisis had a profound impact on the previously politically dormant republic of North Ossetia. Two prominent civil organisations uniting the victims of the attack, "Mothers of Beslan" and "Voice of Beslan", emerged, superseding the earlier "Teachers' Committee". However, the Teachers' Committee played a pivotal role in the self-organising efforts of the victims of the attack. Eventually, the Mothers of Beslan became close to the republican government, while the Voice of Beslan remained fiercely opposed to the government. In September 2004, protesters nearly ousted the then president of the

republic, Alexander Dzasokhov, having organised a massive rally in the central square of Vladikavkaz (Pliev and Rudneva 2004). Alexander Dzasokhov was eventually ousted from office in 2005 and was succeeded by Taimuraz Mamsurov, a long-time North Ossetian apparatchik, and also father of two former hostages at the Beslan School (Abbasov and Solyanskaya 2005).

The armed insurgency in the North Caucasus was also affected by the hostage attack. September 2004 was the last time as of February 2013 that the insurgency reverted to the tactic of mass hostage-taking. This change of tactics may have been due to the killing of Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev in summer 2006 (Stepanov 2006). But the change may also have been brought about by the ineffectiveness of the tactic – the previous hostage-taking attack at the Moscow Dubrovka theatre in 2002 also yielded no benefits for the insurgency movement (“60 Chasov” 2002). Violence, however, did not stop in inner Russia or the North Caucasus. The insurgency turned to different tactics, extensively using suicide bombers to inflict damage on government officials, police and civilians, without attempting to engage in negotiations. In January 2011 a suicide bomber blew himself up in the Moscow airport of Domodedovo, killing 37 people and injuring over 100. In September 2011, 73 percent of Russians surveyed by the Levada Centre polling organisation indicated that they were afraid of terror attacks. Eighty percent of the respondents assessed the probability of new terror attacks as high (“Ot redaktsii” 2002). Conflict in the North Caucasus itself grew exponentially as large portions of the population in other republics of the region neighbouring Chechnya became antagonized to Russian rule. Moreover, despite the official portrayal of the attack in Beslan as an Islamist assault, Islam spread steadily in North Ossetia itself, although the republic remained a majority non-Muslim one (Roshchin 2012).

The Russian government was in a good position to benefit from the Beslan attack. Within days of the attack, President Vladimir Putin initiated a move to abolish the institution of elected governors across the Russian Federation under the pretext of improving governance in the country. By December 2004, the process was concluded and Russians were barred from electing their regional governors (“Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii” 2004). Plans for abolishing directly elected governors must have already been in place in Moscow, otherwise the government could not have moved so quickly after the attack to implement this change. The Russian government apparently needed a shock, such as the Beslan hostage attack, to justify the move. To a great extent Moscow’s decision was dictated by the actual or perceived problem of separatism in the North Caucasus. One can postulate that the abolition of governors’ elections throughout the Russian Federation was partly due to the problems of the North Caucasus.<sup>4</sup>

The hostage attack in Beslan was a milestone on the path of Russia’s declining democracy, and the country braced for increasingly greater restrictions on freedoms. This is an evident illustration of how colonies can impact on the wider metropole, or more precisely, how the metropolitan power’s actions in its colonies have a rebound effect on the wider metropole. By depriving people of the right to elect their own governors, Moscow contributed to democracy’s decline not only in the North Caucasus, but throughout ethnic Russian lands as well.<sup>5</sup>

The degrading of the rule of law in Russia was one of the less noticed after-effects of the Beslan hostage attack. The official criminal investigation as of April 2013, over eight years after the attack, has not been concluded. In fact civil activists in Beslan have claimed that the investigation has to all intents and purposes stalled (“Ne dadim zamolchat’ Beslan” 2010). One reason for the length of the investigation is that the attack provoked a wave of social activism in North Ossetia. This level of social activism was so high that the authorities may have decided to wait until people had forgotten the drama and accepted official conclusions. The fact that Beslan was investigated in such a spurious manner meant that all other terror attacks that followed were treated in the same manner. The absence of public scrutiny, robust media and political opposition in the country resulted in further degradation of law enforcement among security agencies.

None of the investigations of the events in Beslan undertaken so far have proved satisfactory. Vice-speaker of the North Ossetian parliament Stanislav Kesaev led a republican commission for investigation of the Beslan hostage attack. The results of the parliamentary investigation had undergone significant alterations prior to their public release, but were still very critical of the official investigation.<sup>6</sup> The Russian parliamentary commission led by Alexander Torshin undertook another investigative effort that resulted in widespread disappointment. Suffice it to say that Torshin’s report copy-pasted the General Prosecutor’s conclusions.<sup>7</sup> Independent expert and member of the Russian parliament, Yuri Saveliev, carried out his own investigation and showed that government forces

purposefully started the rescue operation that ended so disastrously.<sup>8</sup>

This article starts with a brief discussion of methodology used in the research. Then it proceeds to explore the general outlook of respondents on the socio-political situation in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania after the Beslan crisis. We then attempt to delineate public attitudes toward the regional and national governments and to the leaders on both levels. We finally explore respondents' propensity for active and passive social protest. The presentation of the results follows this order: first come results of the survey, followed by experts' opinions and then those of people in the focus groups thought to be more representative of the general population. Thereby, the survey study was compared to and largely supported by qualitative data gathered on the ground.

### Methodology

This study was a quasi-experiment, in which two groups, one composed of those directly involved in the terrorist act (victims) and another of those not directly involved (non-victims), were surveyed (Devyatko 1997; Yadov 2003); the aim was to reveal the impact of the terrorist act on the world view of the victims. People were questioned as to their assessment of the role of the media in the Beslan tragedy and its aftermath, and their assessment of the psychological assistance afforded them. Further, a large group of questions was addressed to the victims alone, in order to gauge their assessment of efforts by organisations providing medical, material, legal and social assistance.

The North Ossetian Centre for Social Research (affiliated with the Institute of Social and Political Research at the Russian Academy of Sciences) carried out research among inhabitants of Beslan in May-June 2005, taking all the surviving victims and an equal number of non-victims as its object.<sup>9</sup> The main method used was a survey. The specially prepared questionnaire contained groups of questions for the two categories of respondents. The first category was immediate participants of the tragic events – hostages or members of their families. All families directly affected by the tragedy were included in the survey; the number of respondents in this group was 680.

The second category was inhabitants of Beslan not directly affected by the tragedy, i.e. neither they nor their relatives were among the hostages. This control group of 680 people reflected typical demographic parameters (age and sex) and was randomly selected. The total sample from the town of Beslan thus consisted of 1360 people. This sample reflected data from the Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation, according to which there were 1373 surviving victims at Beslan, former hostages or members of their immediate families.

In addition a survey concerning the main themes was carried out among 23 experts (political scientists, lawyers, doctors, psychologists, social workers, state officials, journalists, and activists of socio-political organisations), and four focus groups of 12 participants (workers, specialists with higher technical education, specialists with higher humanities education, military personnel, policemen, state officials, higher education teachers, pensioners, unemployed). All the experts and participants in the focus groups came from North Ossetia. The researchers selected the most publicly known experts in the republic. The focus group participants were selected through stratified sampling on occupation of the participants. The interviews were carried out in Vladikavkaz, the capital city of the republic, and in Beslan.

### Profile of the victims

Table 1 reflects the cross-section of people who could be found in a school at the start of the academic year: most of the victims were people's children (67.7%), followed by other relatives (37.6%), then a large gap to parents (16%) and one or other spouse in married couples (6.9%). The older generation had much lower representation (1.9%).

**Table 1. Did you personally or your relatives suffer as a result of the hostage crisis in School №1 in September 2004? (%)**

	V
Son/daughter	57.0

Father/mother	16.0
Grandson/daughter	10.7
Wife	6.2
Grandmother/father	1.9
Husband	0.7
Other relatives	37.6

**The socio-political situation in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania in the wake of the Beslan hostage crisis**

A qualified majority of survey respondents in both sub-groups (84.1% of victims and 74.8% of non-victims) characterised the socio-political situation in the Republic negatively (Table 2).

**Table 2. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the socio-political situation in our Republic? (%)**

	V	NV
Definitely satisfied	1.3	2.7
Generally satisfied	7.6	16.0
Hard to say	7.0	6.5
Generally dissatisfied	52.0	50.0
Definitely dissatisfied	32.1	24.8
Total	100	100

Note: V = victims of the Beslan tragedy; NV = non-victims.

Every second respondent in both groups expressed a negative attitude towards the socio-political situation in North Ossetia-Alania as “quite dissatisfied” (52% and 50%), i.e. s/he expressed potential tension. Only a third of the victims (32.1%) and a quarter of the control group (24.8%) were “definitely dissatisfied”, expressing a reaction that verged on conflictual. There were equal numbers of “difficult to answer” responses in both groups, a small number of “definitely satisfied”, and twice more non-victims than victims (16% compared with 7.6%) expressed a mildly positive reaction (“quite satisfied”).

Comments by experts provide some qualitative confirmation of the prevalence of negative assessments among the respondents, which can be summarized as follows:  
Summary of experts’ comments:

*“Our society was far from being a real society – ethnically, in an overall national sense, and at the level of the state. The authorities did everything they could to prevent us ever becoming a nation. We were taught from above that other people’s problems were not our problems, and that we should not pay attention to other people’s problems – they would be taken care of. During the conflict in South Ossetia<sup>10</sup> the authorities claimed that it was not our problem, it was far away and did not concern us. We seemed unable to generate brave, selfless, and at the same time educated and intellectual personalities. Perhaps it was the inevitable result of earlier decades. Alcoholism and genetic degradation also had*

*something to do with it. ”*

*“It was impossible to be satisfied with the socio-political situation in our Republic, even by comparison with the situation in Russia. The situation here was worse. The results of the Beslan crisis will continue to be felt for many years. The Republic’s economy was not developing. The whole of our economy was oriented to distilling, the sectors that needed investment were neglected, the moment for economic growth was missed, and now we are seeing the results. The distilling business did not bring enough money because other regions of Russia had learnt how to make vodka and sales went down. The Republic only generated 20 percent of the revenues it needed – it depended on subsidies, which made it dependent on what the centre told it to do. So the Republic had many problems in the political sphere, and the level of corruption was very high, which had an inevitable effect on the socio-political situation. ”*

Focus group participants’ assessment of the political situation:

*“I think that the policies of the last ten years were to blame for making this crisis possible. Russian policy in the Northern Caucasus was also to blame for this terrible tragedy. The war in Chechnya had dragged on when it should have been ended whatever the outcome. The state did not lack the means to do that. It would be a sign of complete anarchy if the state were unable to extinguish a single source of conflict. As regards policy at the level of our Republic, the willingness of our officials to sell their services had convinced people that anything could be bought and sold, that you could reach any official at any level with the help of money. Our Republic had its militia, Federal Security Service, special services. Why didn’t they know that a terrorist act was being prepared? If they did not know, why did we need them, what did we keep them for? If people had to defend themselves, what was the use of these special services? I think that the authorities were completely to blame, and particularly the law enforcement and security services. And the inter-ethnic policy being implemented was also to blame. ”*

*“I would characterise the socio-political situation in the Republic as an explosion waiting to happen. Dzasokhov [president of North Ossetia] had dinned into us that everything was under control, and then it turned out that there was no control. There were no changes in Chechnya where our neighbours gained military experience over a long period. Some of the fighters were in the militia – members of the militia in Ingushetia took part in major crimes. I do not think that the explosion will come from the Ingush alone – it will be a joint attack on Ossetia by the Ingush and the Chechens. They have the same religious framework. It will be backed by huge sums of money. Russia’s promises of help will remain promises because there isn’t any fighting force ready to meet the bandits. That is because no one needs a strong Russia, including the people sitting in the Kremlin. In 1992 [a reference to Ossetian-Ingush or Prigorodny conflict] we could rely on support from the rear, but now we cannot. We need our own special forces, so we don’t have to wait days for help, so that we can defend ourselves. It will all happen as quickly as lightning. As for Putin’s words<sup>11</sup>, I can only say that they were not realistic; Ivanov’s<sup>12</sup> assurances that Russia would not withdraw troops from Georgia were good for less than a month. ”*

The emotional intensity of perceptions helps to assess the state and personal feelings not only of each respondent, but also gives indications as to community perceptions overall.

**Table 3. How do you assess the socio-political situation in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania and in Beslan? (%)**

	RNO-Alania	Beslan

	V	NV	V	NV
There is tension, conflicts are possible	53.4	28.7	52.6	35.2
There is some tension, but not significant	31.9	46.7	35.8	48.7
The situation is stable	8.1	21.5	5.9	14.2
Hard to say	6.6	3.1	5.7	1.9
Total	100	100	100	100

These responses show that the victim group perceived the socio-political situation as equally conflictual in Beslan and in the Republic as a whole. Differences between the two assessments by the victim group were below the statistically significant threshold of 4.5%, which indicate a lack of differentiation, resulting from frustration. More than half of the victim group viewed the level of tension and potential for conflict as very high both in the Republic and in Beslan. Among victims, 3.9% more found “some tension” in Beslan as compared to those finding “some tension” in the Republic, and those who judged Beslan to be stable were 2.2% fewer than those who judged the Republic to be stable.

The share of victims who believed in the possibility of conflict was nearly double that of non-victims who agreed with them – the differences between the two groups were 24.7% for the Republic and 17.4% for Beslan. And the share of victims who believed in a stable situation in the Republic was nearly three times lower than that of non-victims (8.1% compared with 21.5%) and nearly two times lower for the town (5.9% compared with 14.2%).

Non-victims rated stability in the Republic significantly higher than victims (by 7.3%) and the difference between their assessment regarding the possibility of conflict in the Republic and in Beslan was statistically significant (6.7%). The “Hard to say” response was also telling: the fact that double and three times more victims than non-victims gave this answer concerning the Republic and Beslan (6.6% against 3.1% for the Republic and 5.7% against 1.9% for Beslan) indicates a higher level of anxiety among them.

One explanation for the results was pressure on the traumatised part of society and the victims, who might have perceived a relaxed assessment of the situation as a betrayal. It could also be that responses already given by other survey participants had an impact on the numbers of respondents choosing the alternative, “the situation was stable”.

Experts’ assessments:

*“I saw the situation in Beslan as indeterminate, there was a change in the leadership of the Republic and people were expecting improvements, however unlikely. People did not have an accurate appreciation of the situation because of their personal psychological trauma, but in fact, there were no tensions in Beslan. There were no social explosions or reprisals in the first days after the tragedy, and they would be unlikely to happen now.”*

*“The situation in Beslan was tense. Only a month had passed since the appointment of the new head of the Republic amid demonstrations opposite the government building.<sup>13</sup> There was a lot of dissatisfaction at the steps that the new government was taking. The political situation in Beslan depended on the results of the investigation – some facts were kept quiet or concealed and, naturally, people were tense, they were not satisfied with the conduct of the investigation. If facts are concealed or distorted, people will be angry.”*

In order to assess the level of frustration and psychological tension of the respondents, both victims and non-victims (see Table 4), one must clearly understand their psychological status. The approach used was as follows: “Meaningful interpretation of ‘importance of factors’ by criteria of statistical

significance is made possible by boundaries, treating social phenomena as accidental, constant, attaining a mass character, or universal. These boundaries gauged the progress of systemic disturbances in creating ‘potential tension’, which could grow into destructive conflict. A scale was used which defined social phenomena as accidental if less than 10% of the observation group was affected by them, as constant if 11-40% were affected, as tending to mass occurrence if 41-60% were affected, as a mass occurrence if 61-90% were affected, and as universal if the share of those affected was higher than 90%” (Padun and Tarabrina 2003, 136).

**Table 4. Which issues concern you most at present? %**

	V	NV	Δ
Threat of terrorist acts	71.6	59.8	11.8
Health	59.3	47.4	11.9
Fear of the future	57.0	44.4	12.6
Interethnic tension	38.3	32.3	6
Problems due to consequences of the terrorist acts	35.8	16.2	19.6
Material problems	32.4	51.5	-19.1
Growth of drug addiction and alcoholism	28.4	36.5	-8.1
Work and getting a job	26.3	43.2	-16.9
Accommodation	23.4	30.1	-6.7
Ecology	21.6	29.3	-7.7
Economic	15.7	23.7	-8
Family problems	12.9	18.8	-5.9

Note: Δ – difference in percentage points between assessments by victims and non-victims.

The issues were ranked according to the responses by the victim group, and difference of priorities between the main (victim) and control (non-victim) groups were immediately obvious. The results naturally suggested a breakdown of the issues into three blocks: dominance of the victim group (positive values in the right-hand column of the table), dominance of the non-victim group (negative values), and equality of responses by the two groups. Issues on which the difference between responses by victims and non-victims was less than statistically significant (4.5% with a maximum of 5% allowance for statistical error) were treated as cases of equality. For the sake of clarity, issues on which the results for the two groups were equal (on this definition) were left out of the table.

The interpretation of the “importance of factors” showed only one “mass” issue (61-90%) for the victim group, namely the “threat of terrorist acts”, and two issues, which were “tending to mass occurrence” (41-60%), namely health (59.3%) and fear of the future (57%). There was a sharp decline of 18.7 percentage points to the highest of the remaining nine issues, which were all in the “constant” range. Decline from issue to issue through this range was steady, with intervals of 1.8-5.9 points. Two issues in this range were near the upper boundary, namely “interethnic tension” (38.3%) and “problems due to the consequences of terrorist acts” (35.8%). We could conclude that the responses of the victim group showed a clear bias towards problems of a psychological nature. This indicated the presence of “fear structures, arising as a result of traumatic stressful experiences” (Padun and Tarabrina 2003, 136). Victims put socio-economic problems in sixth place (32.4%) and family problems took twelfth place, with only 12.9% putting them near the top of the boundary of the “accidental” category.

“Threat of terrorist acts” was also in the category “tending to mass occurrence” for non-victims at

59.8%, but 51.5% of respondents in this group gave second place to “material problems”. The next three issues followed closely, with 47.4% for “health”, 44.4% for “fear of the future” and 43.2% for “work and finding a job”. The gradual decline in priorities observed among the victim group for nine of these issues, was only matched for six of them among the non-victim group. The non-victims put “problems due to consequences of terrorist acts” in the last place, while this issue was of concern for a third of the victim group. For reasons which were not entirely clear, the non-victim group put “family problems” near the bottom of the list – in second-last place with 18.8%, compared with last place among the victim group. As already mentioned, differentiation for the gamut of day-to-day issues (low prioritisation of these issues by the victim group) was perfectly understandable in terms of “fear structures”, entailing reduced attention to current day-to-day problems, and in terms of low personal and professional motivation.

Finally, we come to issues not included in the table, which were perceived roughly equally by the two groups (with variations inside a statistical margin of error of 4.5%). These were “the crime situation and the rise of the crime rate” (42.8% and 42.5%), “education” (20.1% and 24.4%), “social issues” (19.1% and 22.6%), “political” (18.5% and 18.0%), and “corruption” (17.2% and 17.7%). The similarity in the responses suggested that these issues had background significance for the community and did not have traumatic associations.

### Government structures

Disasters – whether natural, industrial or due to human action – emphasise the real as opposed to the mythologised situation of the individual in society. Most of all, disasters provoke a harsh assessment of government at all levels. Ordinary citizens did not distinguish levels of government and treated all its three branches as a single “means of security” in everyday life. The socio-political situation was whatever its subjects made it, and this was the issue, which concerned us in Table 5.

**Table 5. Assess steps by the Russian government structures, the Prosecutor’s Office, and the Parliamentary Commission of the State Duma, to investigate the circumstances of the Beslan terrorist act, and say whether you believe that the results of the investigation will be made public? (%)**

Possible answers	Government structures		Prosecutor’s Office		Parliamentary Commission	
	V	NV	V	NV	V	NV
No significant result	42.2	35.2	41.9	34.4	41.3	31.1
Productive, but results will not be published	34.0	41.8	34.7	41.8	28.8	33.5
Productive and results will be published	7.8	7.7	7.5	7.8	7.8	7.8
Never heard about this before	0.2	0.0	0.3	0.8	2.5	8.2
Hard to say	15.8	15.3	15.6	15.2	19.6	19.5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

The responses given by a third of non-victims and more than a third of victims suggested that they did not believe that government was capable of carrying out its functions: respectively 35.2% and 42.2% of the two groups did not believe that Russian government structures were capable of getting to the bottom of what happened. The differences between responses of the two groups were two percentage points above the level of statistical significance as regards the government and the Prosecutor’s Office, and the difference as regards the Parliamentary Commission was twice larger. These results were in the

category “tending to mass occurrence”. Nearly as many respondents (34%) believed that government lacked courage, since concealment by government of the results of its actions was inadmissible except in situations of war or pandemic. We will now examine these results in more detail.

There were “diagonal” correspondences between responses by the two groups to “no significant result” and “productive, but results will not be published” regarding the government and the Prosecutor’s Office: 42.2% for victims closely matched 41.8% for non-victims; 34% was close to 35.2%; 41.9% was close to 41.8%; and 34.7% was close to 34.4%. This pattern could be due to the more intensely negative attitude of the victims, who viewed circumstances relating to their trauma more acutely. This was confirmed by the coincidence of response levels to the positive alternatives: “productive and results will be published” (7.8% and 7.7% for government, 7.5% and 7.8% for the Prosecutor’s Office) and “Hard to say” (15.8% and 15.3% for government, 15.6% and 15.2% for the Prosecutor’s Office).

Both victims and non-victims had a negative view of the Parliamentary Commission’s work: 41.3% and 28.8% respectively believed that this work would have “no significant result”, while 31.1% and 33.5% believed that it could be productive, but results would not be published. Positive responses were exactly equal at 7.8% and nearly one in five of both sets of respondents said that it was “Hard to say”. Both groups had less knowledge of the activity of the Parliamentary Commission than that of the government or prosecutors – 2.5% compared with 0.2% and 0.3% in the case of victims, and 8.2% compared with 0.8% for non-victims. This offers evidence that society was badly informed about the activity of the main legislative body of the state and that its impact on society was minimal.

Experts’ comments on the parliamentary investigation into the Beslan hostage attack:

*“The main emphasis is on what the Parliamentary Commission will do. Naturally, its activity is limited, but if it takes the path of least resistance, and provides “convenient” results, if it does not answer the questions which people are asking, it could lead to destabilisation in the Republic and affect government structures.”*

*“There is no confidence in the work of the Parliamentary Commission, because there is no confidence in government as a whole.”*

*“The Parliamentary Commission gives no answers and tries to make excuses - its action leaves a lot to be desired.”*

### **Political leadership: President Putin and President Dzasokhov**

Government is judged by the actions of the chief officials of the state. Although in crises one is often assured that the “government is the people”, nevertheless the personality of the leader is of prime importance for all members of society. Table 6 gives details of what actions the respondents expected from their political leaders.

**Table 6. What actions did you expect from the President of Russia and the President of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania after the hostage-rescue operation was completed? (%)**

	President of Russia		President of North Ossetia-Alania	
	V	NV	V	NV
Declaration of a decisive battle against terrorism	50.2	48.6	35.3	39.5
Explanation of what had happened	39.3	41.7	49.9	50.2
An official address to the nation	35.1	41.7	29.5	36.0

A public apology	15.9	13.9	35.6	40.2
Resignation	4.9	2.3	37.7	42.5
Other	1.7		2.1	0.4
Hard to say	6.6	3.5	5.3	2.7

As in the previous table the ranking was according to responses by the victim group, and the ranking confirmed the original contention that the primary effect of trauma was to radicalise a person's attitude to past and present events. In this state of mind individual consciousness was unsusceptible to secondary influences – deep-set patterns of personality came to the fore, and we found a manifest lack of the much-vaunted idea of separatism – hopes of both victims and non-victims were focused on the President of Russia. Every second respondent (50.2%) linked their hopes for a “decisive battle against terrorism” to the person of the Russian President. It was also notable that regarding the head of the Republic, both victims and non-victims gave priority to verbal explanations (49.9% and 50.2% respectively) over and above the use of force (35.3% and 39.5%); “official address to the nation” (29.5% and 36%); nobody was likely to find an “unofficial address” acceptable in such circumstances; “public apology” (35.6% and 40.2%) and “resignation” (37.7% and 42.5%). While the latter steps were expected from the President of the Republic by roughly a third of respondents, only one in six expected a public apology from the President of Russia and only one in 20 (4.9%) of the victims and one in 50 (2.3%) of the non-victims expected his resignation.

Some typical opinions of both victims and non-victims concerning President Vladimir Putin:

*“The Russian authorities did not do what they said they would do. Putin flew down to see us, but what did he achieve? My attitude to him changed for the worse. When he stood for President the first time, I voted for him but since then we have had nothing but tragedies.”*

*“Putin was in Moscow. You could not blame him for the fact that local law-enforcement agencies failed to operate... My opinion about him had not changed.”*

Typical opinions of the focus group participants about President Vladimir Putin:

*“I think that Putin reacted to the situation as best he could. My attitude to him had not changed, but events showed that unfortunately the vertical power structure, which he had created, did not work because no one wanted to take responsibility for freeing the hostages. The situation gave a clear illustration of the extent to which Putin was isolated.”*

*“I think that the federal authorities were to blame. All our law enforcement and military authorities, including those in North Ossetia, were subject to Moscow. The federal centre had adopted the wrong tactics: strengthening of the army and other law and order organisations was ineffective because the terrorists did not operate on an open front, they did not have a rear – they operated in small groups. So we needed similar groups who could fight in those situations. The law enforcers and the army had a huge numerical superiority at Beslan – the army was there, the whole North Ossetian militia was on alert, but the results were appalling. Dozens of generals proved unable to deal with a few bandits. Conclusions had to be drawn and these structures had to be reformed, instead of simply increasing their number.”*

Typical opinions of experts on the President of North Ossetia-Alania:

*“As President of the Republic it was not Dzasokhov's job to go and rescue the hostages.”*

*That was the task of law enforcement agencies and special services. But he should have done all that was within his power. In his place I would have resigned after the loss of life for which he carried some of the blame.”*

*“People did not vote for Dzasokhov at the second elections, he simply took power. What was there to love, value or respect him for? Our fields were choked with weeds. If a cow walked across them, it disappeared behind the weeds. They promised us a better life... but how will we lead a better life if our fields are barren? I would say that bandits rule us now. Dzasokhov’s resignation was what people needed. We had Galazov, who maintained some sort of order, but Dzasokhov had just let things go: rob what you want from whom you want. There was no justice anymore.”*

Comments of focus group members about President Dzasokhov:

*“Our President had no more to offer after his second term. His conduct was inadequate – it was even rumoured that his TV appearances were recorded at his country house during the crisis. People will not forgive him and he had lost face. As a diplomat, he gathered people around him who were of the same ilk, and if he resigned, someone just like him would take his place.”*

*“Very little depended on him and the question of whether he acted rightly or not did not have real relevance. As President of the Republic he was the guarantor of our security under the Constitution. He didn’t fulfil his duties under the Constitution, so something was wrong with his policy. He had his own view of events, but his view did not meet the requirements of the day. Decisions were increasingly taken on the basis of considerations that did not benefit the general public. The considerations, which were advanced in his support, were the opinion of a small group of people, who were personally interested in keeping him as President in order to protect their own positions.”*

*“Did Dzasokhov act rightly? It was hard to judge. It was an extraordinary situation for him and for Putin. What was expected of him was to show more humanity – then people’s attitude would have been more forgiving. Our leadership took such a formal approach... Of course, a leader has to be diplomatic and strong-willed, but he also has to be humane. Our leadership did not reveal that quality to the public. And no amount of subsidies and money offered to the families of those who died could compensate for an absence of simple humanity. Did he act rightly or not? I did not have enough information to be able to judge. The fact that he was present at the crisis headquarters day and night? As the leader, he had to be. That was his duty, and there was no reason to give him good points for that. What he should have done was to show that he was one of the people and not above the people.”*

### **Social Protest**

Attitudes toward social protest indicated surprising results (Table 7).

**Table 7. Have you taken part in any social actions since 3 September? (%)**

	V	NV
No, I have not taken part	62.4	65.4
I have not taken part and do not approve of participation	24.3	24.6
Yes I have attended protest actions	11.8	8.3
Hard to say	1.5	1.7

Total	100	100
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Both groups showed the same attitude of civil immaturity: 62.4% of victims and 65.4% of non-victims said that they had not protested. This result was understandable in the case of victims, who had more immediate things to worry about than public meetings, which in any case may not draw much attention. But the position of the non-victims was very surprising. The closeness of results among the victim and non-victim groups could be explained by the state of stupor affecting the whole community after the events. The absenteeism of a quarter of all the survey respondents (24.3% and 24.6%), who “have not taken part and do not approve of participation”, was particularly striking. About a tenth of each group (11.8% and 8.3%) did assume an active social position. The overall conclusion has to be that both groups were fearful of “annoying” the authorities, and were equally distrustful of the ability of the authorities to enter into a dialogue based on trust.

### NGOs

The last item in the socio-political section concerns attitudes towards “local non-governmental organisations” which sprang up among the traumatised community.

**Table 8. How do you view the activities of the Mothers’ Committee and the Teachers’ Committee? (%)**

	Mothers’ Committee		Teachers’ Committee	
	V	NV	V	NV
Definitely approve	13.1	15.4	7.7	8.3
Approve	23.7	20.3	23.0	21.3
Hard to say	23.6	32.5	31.5	38.8
Don’t approve	24.6	15.4	21.0	8.3
Definitely don’t approve	10.1	10.2	7.4	6.7
Never heard about this before	4.9	6.1	9.5	16.7
Total	100	100	100	100

Victims were divided into two equal groups, for and against, both as regards the Mothers’ Committee and the Teachers’ Committee: 36.8% expressed approval and 34.7% disapproved of the Mothers’ Committee, while 30.7% approved and 28.4% disapproved of the Teachers’ Committee, and “difficult to answer” responses concerning the two organisations were 23.6% and 31.5%.

Non-victims showed a clear majority for positive assessments. The Mothers’ Committee was approved of by 35.7%, while 25.6% were against, while the Teachers’ Committee was supported by 29.6% and opposed by 15%. However, there were more “difficult to answer” responses among the non-victims – 32.5% for the Mothers’ Committee and 38.8% for the Teachers’ Committee. The higher level of respondents, who had not previously heard of the Teachers’ Committee, showed that it was not popular among the people of Beslan. It was also notable that “difficult to answer” responses were given by over a quarter of victims, even though the issue was of obvious concern to them, and by nearly a third of non-victims. In the case of non-victims, this response could be viewed as caution due to the extreme sensitivity of the community towards any hint of a partisan attitude.

“Traumas provoke an emotional reaction, whose force is directly proportional to the degree of

threat and horror, which accompany them. One way of dealing with such intense emotions is to seek a scapegoat, onto whom the weight of responsibility for the tragic events can be unloaded” (McFarlane and van der Kolk 2003, 10). In their relations with traumatised people living out their experiences through their actions, psychiatrists should respect the natural urge of the victims to overcome their post-traumatic helplessness, while helping them find ways to avoid the danger of reinforcing their trauma in a new social context (18). Specialists should pay particular attention to the last point in order to prevent the victims being confirmed in the role of “victims”, which could have serious long-term consequences.

The opinions of two experts and a member of the focus group were as follows:

*“One cannot talk about the activity of the Mothers’ Committee – its activity is only limited to occasional and sporadic acts.”*

*“So far as I know the Teachers’ Committee does not exist as such. Local people were hostile due to suspicions that they were responsible for what happened. It was rumoured that the teachers did not behave as they ought to have done.”*

*“The Teachers’ Committee: Zaseev was expelled from the Committee. He took part in a demonstration supporting Khodarkovsky and they expelled him.”<sup>44</sup>*

The victims were also asked about their attitude regarding the involvement of Russian and international NGOs and human rights organisations assisting the victims of Beslan (Table 9).

**Table 9. What is your attitude to the involvement of Russian and international NGOs and human rights organisations in helping victims of the terrorist act? (%)**

	Russian	International
Definitely positive	41.0	41.0
Generally positive	32.4	32.8
Hard to say	20.1	20.8
Generally negative	5.5	4.6
Definitely negative	1.0	0.9
Total	100	100

Over half of respondents were positive (“definitely” or “generally approve”) about the involvement of Russian and international organisations, giving them respective approval ratings of 73.4% and 73.8%. Every fifth respondent found the question difficult to answer, which probably reflected inadequate information about the sort of help that such organisations provided. Some respondents considered the help of such organisations unnecessary (5.55% for Russian and 4.5% for international).

## Conclusion

A traumatised individual consciousness is unsusceptible to secondary influences – deep-set patterns of the personality come to the fore, and we identified profound disinclination for separatism among the surveyed population (Kholmogorova and Garanyan 1999). The respondents pinned their hopes for necessary actions to provide security on the President of Russia. Every second respondent linked his hopes for a “decisive battle against terrorism” with the person of the Russian President. It was unclear whether this was the effect of “rallying around the flag” or the lack of political competition in the

country (Merzlikin and Babakaev 2000). We should nonetheless treat these findings with certain care, because the situation in North Ossetia, especially in the wake of Beslan attack, was not favourable for free speech. Despite all the measures the researchers took in order to assure honest responses from the respondents, there may have been self-censorship on their side.

It is noteworthy that reticence about the Russian government was complemented with fairly widespread and openly articulated negative attitudes toward the neighbouring Ingush people. This effect can be explained by two distinct factors. First, even though respondents have negative attitudes toward the central Russian government, these may be suppressed for fear of governmental reprisals. Therefore, they “scapegoat” the Ingush people as a safer alternative. Secondly, there may be a perception among respondents that the Beslan attack was a covert attack by Ingushetia against North Ossetia, coding these events instead as ‘interethnic conflict’ or ‘inter-republic conflict’ between these two national republics.

It was also notable that, regarding the head of the Republic, both victims and non-victims gave priority to verbal explanations over use of force, an official address to the nation, public apology, or resignation. A public apology or resignation were expected from the President of the Republic by roughly a third of respondents while only one in six expected a public apology from the President of Russia and only one in 20 victims and one in 50 non-victims expected his resignation. This finding provides some support to our second explanation for the respondents’ attitudes toward the central government and the Ingush people.

The research showed why the Beslan hostage attack did not become a catalyst for political changes in North Ossetia. The fact that North Ossetia was part of the Russian Federation meant that potential for political reform was limited due to the overarching authority of the federal government. Unpreparedness on the ground and the absence of political opposition precluded any transformation of the political space in the republic. The subsequent war in the Georgian breakaway region of South Ossetia in 2008 partly deflected public criticism of the government policies in North Ossetia and strengthened the central government’s position. Tir and Jasinski (2008) argue that government may engage in violent attacks against ethnic minorities to distract the public from more important domestic issues. Chiozza and Goemans (2003) argue that actually leaders in weak political positions tend to avoid crises. Whether Russian president Vladimir Putin needed the Beslan hostage attack for political reasons or whether it happened spontaneously, the Russian government certainly made extensive use of it to strengthen its grip on power and curb civil liberties. So, judging by the outcome, regardless of the motives behind the attack, it can tentatively be concluded that high profile terrorist attacks have adverse effect on democratic development of countries.

However, the Beslan attack still affects North Ossetian society in a number of ways. The attack had a lasting negative effect on Ossetian-Ingush relations that never recovered to the level of fragile trust that existed prior to 2004 and the signing of a bilateral agreement between the republics in 2002. The Beslan hostage crisis has contributed to the rise of nationalism among Ossetians derived from the popular reading of the events as “an attack by the Ingush against Ossetians”.

The Beslan attack allowed central authorities in Moscow to solidify political power in their hands by abolishing regional governors’ direct elections, but that effect was short-lived. In 2012, eight years after they were abolished, regional governors’ elections were rehabilitated. In the political struggle that gradually unfolds in Russia, following mass protests in Moscow in 2011 and 2012, the Beslan hostage crisis and the authorities’ role in its handling may again become an important political issue.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Valeriy Dzutsev is a Ph.D. student at Arizona State University and North Caucasus analyst for the Jamestown Foundation. Khasan Dzutsev is the director of the North Ossetian Centre for Social Research at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

<sup>2</sup> This article makes use of select materials published by Khasan Dzutsev (2007).

<sup>3</sup> The population of Beslan on 1 January 2005 was estimated at 35,604 people.

<sup>4</sup> See extensive pundit and expert sources at [http://www.memoid.ru/node/Polemika\\_vokrug\\_vybornosti\\_gubernatorov\\_v\\_Rossii#](http://www.memoid.ru/node/Polemika_vokrug_vybornosti_gubernatorov_v_Rossii#)

<sup>5</sup> See the lecture of prominent Russian historian Dmitry Furman (2005) on the expansion and contraction of the Russian Empire. Furman discusses the differences between Western colonial powers and Russia, and why Western countries were able to maintain different political regimes at home and in their colonies, while Russia could not.

<sup>6</sup> The report is available on the Caucasian Knot (*Kavkazskiy Uzel*) website, at <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/85838/>

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Torshin’s speech in the Russian parliament on December 28, 2005 is available on the website *Pravdabeslana.ru* at

<http://www.pravdabeslana.ru/torshintez.htm>. Comparison of Torshin's report and criminal investigators' report are available from the same web resource <http://www.pravdabeslana.ru/spisali.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> See the website *Pravdabeslana.ru*, <http://pravdabeslana.ru/doklad/oglavlenie.htm>

<sup>9</sup> This study was compiled with the support of the Charities Aid Foundation (UK), Project code number BLO 13. Parts of the study were published in Russian in 2008 under the title *Rezul'taty sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniya v g. Beslan, provedennogo v mae - iyune 2005 g.* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> The respondent refers here to outbreaks of violence in South Ossetia prior to the time of the survey in 2005.

<sup>11</sup> This is probably a reference to Vladimir Putin's reassurances.

<sup>12</sup> Sergey Ivanov was Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation 2001-2007.

<sup>13</sup> The President of North Ossetia, Alexander Dzasokhov, was replaced as head of the republic on 7 June 2005, at the time when the survey and focus groups were conducted.

<sup>14</sup> The respondent refers here to one of Russia's richest businessmen, Mikhail Khodorkovskiy, who was imprisoned in 2003 and sentenced for alleged economic crimes. Khodorkovskiy is widely alleged to have been personally targeted by Vladimir Putin. The respondent suggests that by expelling Zaseev from their organisation, they acted on orders from the government or wanted to appease the government.

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