

## **Chechnya Figures Large In The Georgian Media**

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In stark contrast to 1994-1996, even the state media in Georgia is heaping criticism on Russia for the campaign in Chechnya.

Chechen vice-president Vakha Arsanov was pleased at the turnout when he arrived in Tbilisi for a 'state' visit in September. "I never imagined there were so many journalists in Georgia," he quipped.

But the pleasure was not shared by Russia, which had scheduled a visit by its own foreign minister that same day. Moscow's patience with Tbilisi is wearing as thin. It thinks Georgia is not doing enough to help it rein in the breakaway republic of Chechnya - but Georgia thinks Russia is not taking enough care to keep the conflict contained.

But Arsanov's visit, commented the Tbilisi daily Resonance, was really adding insult to injury. "Hosting Arsanov was a bit of a slap in the face for Russia considering Tbilisi officialdom was expecting Russia's Foreign Minister on the same day."

Russia's second military campaign against Chechnya has attracted widespread concern over the border in Georgia. Russian military helicopters and aircraft have already violated Georgian air space, bombing targets near the Chechen border on two occasions. Azerbaijan has also been hit.

The Georgian media have come out strongly against Russia's heavy-handed tactics in Chechnya. Independent broadcaster Rustavi-2 dispatched journalist Nana Lejava to Chechnya at the start of the conflict.

Lejava's reports have made a strong impression on viewers, fuelling anti-Russian opinion, even though previous coverage had been generally neutral. The Georgian press started reporting events in the North Caucasus in early August immediately after the incursion into Dagestan by the militant Chechen force leader Shamil Basaev and his Islamist lieutenant 'Khatab'.

Though Resonance was warning within a week of Arsanov's visit on September 3 that Russian would retaliate against the Chechens, as long as the crisis focused on Dagestan, throughout August and September, the Georgian media relied mostly on Russian information agencies for their coverage from the North Caucasus.

But when the Russian army began their assault on Chechnya, newspapers like Resonance and Akhali Taoba abandoned their neutral stance and work began to develop independent sources of information. Georgian agencies like PrimeNews, BS-Press and Caucasus-Press with valuable experience and contacts gained during the first war in Chechnya (1994-1996), were the first to provide new material.

By September 17, the line was becoming openly hostile. Resonance journalist, Zviad Pockhua, accused Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin of trying "to drag Georgia into the war" with his demands that Georgia join the struggle "against armed Boeviks" (Chechen separatist militants). Pockhua went on to criticise Georgian leaders for their 'soft' response.

Throughout the last weeks of September the Chechnya issue and related questions surrounding Georgian-Chechen and Georgian-Russian relations filled the front pages of the Georgian print media.

Vakha Arsanov returned to Georgia on October 2 and announced plans to set up a Chechen information center in Tblisi. "With Georgia's assistance the world must be made aware of what is going on there", Arsanov said.

In sharp contrast to the media in Russia, not only did Georgian readers and TV viewers get the Chechen side of the story - complete with graphic imagery of the devastation they were enduring under Russian air attack - but they were also hearing it from the Chechens themselves. The Georgian media were also drawing heavily from western media, which had already turned critical of the affair.

On October 4, an article entitled "Bloodshed has started in Chechnya - hospitals struggle to cope" from the Washington Post was reprinted in Resonance. Again on October 5, Resonance journalist David Bakhradze drew from articles in the New York Times and the Washington Post to publish a story headlined by the words of Aslan Maskhadov, "We may start eating dogs, but we'll never abandon independence."

>From October 1-10 the Georgian press covered events in Chechnya on a daily basis. Interest declined as the parliamentary elections approached, but on October 23, various Georgian papers published Aslan Maskhadov's "underground" interview with the correspondent of the Times.

Initially, the Georgian media focused on the military campaign but as Russian forces advanced into Chechnya attention shifted to the plight of refugees fleeing into Ingushetia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Public opinion in Georgia was split on the issue of providing shelter for Chechen refugees with some people expressing the fear that such action would provide an ideal pretext for Russian military action inside Georgia.

Georgia has twice refused Russia permission to use her forces stationed in Georgia in the Chechen campaign or to patrol the Georgian side of the frontier.

The failure of the pro-Russian Revival of Georgia coalition in the recent elections only added insult to injury. In retaliation Russia used the pretext of controlling the movement of Chechen militants to impose visa requirements with Georgia and Azerbaijan. But the Chairman of Georgia's Defence and Security Committee, Revaz Adamia only commented that "visa requirements should exist, as it will help Moscow realize that Georgia is a sovereign state".

The Georgian media have also focused on the tendentiousness of coverage of the crisis in Russia. In contrast to the Chechen conflict in 1994-96, the Russian media have fallen behind the government line. The Russian authorities and military strictly control journalists travelling to Chechnya and obstruct them wherever possible. Only those, and there are surprisingly many, who are willing to censor the unpalatable to Moscow, get the support they need to work.

In the run-up to the OSCE summit in Istanbul (November 18-19) the Georgian media turned to Chechnya once again. Reports accused Moscow of violating their commitments on troop withdrawal under the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, and linked these concerns with Russia's military presence in Georgia.

Russia maintains forces in Georgia, ostensibly as peacekeepers in the aftermath of the country's own separatist civil conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia after Georgian independence in 1991.

The Tbilisi media called on Moscow to reduce its armed forces not only in the North Caucasus, but in the South Caucasus as well - calls reinforced by a second accidental Russian air strike inside Georgia, near the border village of Shatili, on the eve of the OSCE Summit.

Western criticism of Russia's campaign in Chechnya received wide coverage, but the headline story was the agreement on the construction of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline between Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. The Georgian media interpreted this as an unprecedented setback for Russia in the Caucasus.

The print media in Georgia claim the West has in fact granted Russia a free hand in Chechnya in exchange for the Southern Caucasus. Chechen separatist, Shamil Basaev, said as much in an announcement carried by Prime News. "I have no illusions regarding the OSCE summit," Basaev said. "The West will never make a decision that forces Russia to stop the war."

The daily Akhali Taoba has repeatedly complained that "the West's criticism of Russia is too discreet". But the Georgian media is not automatically supportive of the Chechens. President Aslan Maskhadov, though marginalised in Russia, receives a reasonably good press in Georgia.

However Shamil Basaev is very unpopular. During the conflict in Abkhazia, Basaev played an active role fighting Georgian forces and has much Georgian blood on his hands. Also most Georgians blame Basaev and Khatab's provocative incursions into Dagestan for bringing down the current tragedy on Chechnya.

Recognising this, when discussing Georgia-Chechen relations, both Aslan Maskhadov and Vakha Arsanov have been at pains to emphasise Chechnya made a mistake by supporting separatists during the Abkhazia-Georgia conflict.

Chechnya's role in Abkhazia was the source of further speculation following disclosures by the Georgian Ministry of State Security that the separatist government in Sukhumi was placing Chechen refugees in the Gali region. This area crosses the Georgian-Abkhaz border and is mainly populated by Georgians.

The media have voiced concerns that the presence of refugees in the area will trigger antagonism with Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia. Further instability in Abkhazia will create an additional obstacle to carrying out reiterated commitments under the CFE Treaty confirmed in Istanbul. These require Russia to withdraw from the military bases in Bombora in Abkhazia and Vaziani, near Tbilisi.

During the 1994-1996 Chechen war, the Georgian State media was generally loyal to Russia. Today, however, the state media is as critical of Russia as the independent media, a clear indication that the Georgian government no longer feels the need to muzzle criticism of Moscow.

**Location:** [Caucasus](#)  
[Turkey](#)  
[Stavropol](#)  
[South Ossetia](#)

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