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.

1 For a more in-depth legal debate on legitimate defense, see Wright (2008).
We can live happily; it is by our ancestors; it is, guard that will transport the nation back in time to an American government itself during the Kosovo War, whose military success was narrated as a victory of all in pursuit of the identified end. Namely, there is an ultimate purpose – on the basis of the sacred texts (Stables, 2003). Therefore, criminal or structural violence is excluded, in spite of the fact that it also responds to profoundly political reasons.

In this respect, there is plenty of literature that has sought to unravel the discourses revolving around political violence. 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. 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 (Swirsycz, 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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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.
Akhmad Kadyrov and the tragic siege at Beslan School in 2004. A specific design of critical discourse analysis (CDA), called “ideological square”, which will be described below, was used for data collection and analysis.

2. The outbreak of the conflict in 1999

After the First Russian-Chechen War (1994–1996) – the military reaction of the Kremlin to the unilaterally declared independence of what was then known as the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (CRI) – the region was plunged into a deep depression caused by the ravages of the conflict, the consequent increase in crime, internal political disputes, and the pressure brought to bear by Moscow in order to hinder the peace process, among other aspects (Danne reuther, 2010; Galeotti, 2002, 2014; Gammer, 2005; Sagramoso, 2007; Wilhelmsen, 2005). This state of affairs affected the nationalist government of Aslan Maskhadov, who, in spite of occupying the presidency until his death, provided ample proof of his inability to retain the monopoly of violence (Rivas Otero & Tarín Sanz, 2016). The vacuum generated by the “weak authority” of Maskhadov was exploited by the warlords and the incipient Islamist insurgency to occupy a greater number of positions of power (Le Huérou, Aude Merlin, & Kozlowski, 2014; Moore & Tumelty, 2009), a frame in which the uncontrolled incursion of Chechen Islamist guerrillas into Dagestan in 1999 must be understood.

After the collapse of the USSR, a thriving Salafi community consolidated its position in Dagestan1 (Ibragimov & Matsuzato, 2014), edified in part on the deception caused by Soviet modernity and its chaotic transition toward capitalism (Ware, Kisriev, Patzelt, & Roericht, 2003). Its main stamping ground was located in the area of Kadar, an irregular strip of land between the capital Makhachkala and the small town of Gimry. This enclave has produced religious leaders such as Rustam Asilderov, the incumbent emir of the Islamic State’s subsidiary in Russia (Vilayat Kavkaz), and, among others, three of the most outstanding personalities of the 1990s, the clerics Akhmad-Kadi Akhtaev, Bagautdin Magomedov, and Abbas Kebedov, these last two being half-brothers.4 Akhtaev is retrospectively considered a moderate (Roshchin, 2003), at least bearing in mind his Salafism; albeit for the traditional Sufi Community, with historical roots in the Muslim Caucasus, he preached extremist religious interpretations typical of foreigners (Makarov, 2008). In fact, this accusation – that Salafism is an imported vision far removed from local tradition – has already been noted in the introduction, the 9/11 terrorist attacks presented his successor Vladimir Putin with the opportunity to “internationalize” the conflict, in line with the West’s struggle in the War on Terror. The war was not only justified as a direct consequence of a prior aggression for which the Chechen authorities were responsible – the invasion of Dagestan and the apartment block bombings – but also because it contributed to improving global security by combating a politically antagonistic global enemy: international jihadist terrorism.

On the whole, the Chechen case was more complex due to the absence of a homogeneous public discourse – a result of the country’s infighting. The political divide between the government of Maskhadov, who had inherited the secular nationalist vision of his predecessor Dzokhkar Dudayev, and the incipient Islamist guerrillas, whose frame of interpretation of the conflict was in line with the rationale of religious war, had become manifest since the interwar period. These discrepancies, or parallel agendas, were not only expressed as part of a calm internal ideological debate, but also led to armed confrontation, above all during the invasion of Dagestan and the apartment block bombings – for which the Chechen authorities were responsible – the invasion of Dagestan and the apartment block bombings – but also because it contributed to improving global security by combating a politically antagonistic global enemy: international jihadist terrorism.


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1 To delve deeper into the origins of Islam in Dagestan, from the 8th century to post-Soviet Russia, see Kisriev and Ware (2002).

2 Bagautdin and Abbas do not share the same surname because they have different fathers.

3 During the Independence process of the CRI Dzokhkar Dudayev, its leader and first president, "was also fully aware that his own Islamic credentials were weak and he thus infused much of his rhetoric with Islamic reference points," for which reason he chose Islam Khalimov as his religious assessor (Moore & Tumelty, 2009, 83).
months running up to the outbreak of the second war, thus contributing to the aforementioned instability. An example of this is an incident that occurred in the town of Gudermes (Chechnya) in 1998, in which the Chechen security forces pressed a group of militant Salafis who were acting as self-appointed “guardians of public morals”, which left over 50 dead (Tarín Sanz, 2017). In this respect, Chechen institutional language “included [a] discourse amenable to the west, emphasizing Chechen victimization and Russian brutality, casting their role in the conflict as motivated by self-defense, and occasionally accusing Russia of trying to annihilate Muslims” (Radnitz, 2006, 251), though this discourse might not have coincided exactly with the Islamist insurgency’s version of events. To approach this issue, and at the same time to provide empirical data for analysis, a CDA of Chechen jihadist propaganda was conducted.

3. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the ideological square

The study of war discourse implies establishing the antagonism between the ally who reacts to an aggression and the enemy responsible for the violence occasioning the conflict. This “us/other” dichotomy, whose construction is disputed in the field of discourse and which embodies the nature of politics as a discipline (Mouffe, 1995; Schmitt, 2007), entails a power relation. Assuming this premise to be the case, it was considered appropriate to use a version of discourse analysis with a notable track record in the study of the linguistic particles with which the actors in question are constructed: CDA. CDA “primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context,” and thus “take explicit position” (Van Dijk, 2003a, 352) and are honored to do so (Van Dijk, 2003b).

For CDA, nonetheless, discourse is much more than a sequence of linguistic signs; it is, moreover, a three-dimensional entity: text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 1995). It is text insofar as it is understood as a product of language. Its analysis – text analysis – is descriptive, focusing on the structure and formal aspects of discourse, such as vocabulary, grammar, deixis, and its organization. It is also discursive practice, linked to text production and interpretation, insasmuch as it is associated with an established genre or type of discourse connected to a particular social activity. And, lastly, it is sociocultural practice, seeing that it explains the relationship between the discursive process and social processes, since discourse constructs or reproduces a reality, transmits or transforms ideologies, perpetrates or subverts power relations and its own violence against the Russian enemy.

To apply CDA a concrete research design, defined by Van Dijk (1998a, 33) as an “ideological square”, involving a “strategy of polarization – positive ingroup description, and negative outgroup description,” which “appears in most social conflict” and that “may be expressed in the choice of lexical items that imply positive or negative evaluations, as well as in the structure of whole propositions and their categories,” was used. This design can be summarized in four vertexes that serve as a guide for the analysis: (1) “Emphasize our good properties/actions”, (2) “Emphasize their bad properties/actions”, (3) “Mitigate our bad properties/actions”, and (4) “Mitigate their good properties/actions”.

The ideological square has been successfully used in other media discourse analyses with similar characteristics. In some cases, its use is limited to that of a theoretical benchmark, as occurs in Karda (2012), whose paper describes the “us/other” strategies used by the Turkish media to combat the clandestine Ergenekon network; in Els (2013), a work revealing the xenophobic discourses appearing in the newspaper The Daily Sun; in Hearns-Branaman (2015), who compares the coverage of the diplomatic disputes between the US and Iran by different news agencies; or in the analysis of the discourse of the Russian website InoSMI with respect to the Crimea crisis, conducted by Spiessens and Van Poucke (2016). Yet it has also been employed as a methodological tool with the same results, as shown in Turner (2008) on the construction of the lesbian community in the magazine Diva; in Arrunátegui (2010), who analyzes how the Peruvian press characterizes the indigenous subject; or in Mayer, Ajanovic, and Sauer (2014), dealing with the gender roles promoted by the Austrian extreme right. To approach the discourse employed by the Chechen Islamist guerrillas to justify political violence, this second path was taken, not only to detect the use of the specific linguistic structures proposed by Fairclough (1992) and Van Dijk (1998a), but also to deal with other more complex dimensions of this discourse – such as discursive and social practice – which the ideological square model is also capable of addressing (Philo, 2007).

3.1. Delimiting the object of study

In order to analyze the discourse employed by the Islamist guerrillas to justify their own violence, the KC website was chosen. After the First Russian–Chechen War, these armed groups saw in the Internet – and more specifically in the aforementioned news agency – an opportunity to disseminate their message with less restrictions and financial
constraints (Campana & Ducol, 2015). But also because “Chechen websites were intended primarily for international, rather than domestic, audiences (since, presumably, Internet access would not be widespread in Chechnya during wartime), and can therefore be considered a source of public discourse” (Radnitz, 2006, 249).

As regards the period of study, content corresponding to events particularly relevant to the proposed analysis was selected – moments when the guerrillas had to justify their own violence6 because of their relationship with the situational context in which the discourses were produced – since this allowed us to fine-tune the analysis of their ideological content (Van Dijk, 1998b). These events are framed between the birth of the English version of KC (2001) and the death of Aslan Maskhadov (2005), because this period holds a special importance: this is where “a war of identity” during the transition from nationalism to jihadism was fought, in which the discourse played a key role (Janeczko, 2014, 446). So, content related to four events was taken into account: the hostage-taking at the Dubrovka Theater (2002); the campaign of terrorist attacks that accompanied the passing of the pro-Russian Chechen constitution (2003); the assassination of Akhmad Kadyrov (2004); and the massacre at Beslan School (2004).9 Likewise, those forms of journalistic expression that could not be considered informative were discarded (Velásquez Ossa, 2011), since ideological discourse becomes a topic of special interest when the receivers are not forewarned (Van Dijk, 1998b). Thus, only 44 texts, corresponding to news items, communiqués, or interviews related to the above-mentioned events, were included. “Conducting a CDA analysis often involves the analysis of only a small number of texts” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, 207).

3.2. Method application
3.2.1. Emphasize our good properties/actions
Agency, responsibility, and merits. Agency can be understood as the real or potential position of an actor in a conflict, as well as the subject’s own acts and capacity to act (Ema López, 2004). So, it possesses an ideological-guiding role by placing a specific subject in a certain situation and, therefore, constructing an “us” with “our” good actions. This possibility of establishing agency allows us, among other things, to attribute certain responsibilities and merits of the acts integrated into the discourse.

The latest suicide bombing by Chechen independence rebels, apparently an attempt to assassinate the region’s most senior pro-Moscow figure, followed a truck bomb at government offices in the north of the territory on Monday which killed 59. [...] Pro-Russian [sic] officials said she had intended to kill Akhmad Kadyrov, the pro-Moscow head of the Chechen administration and a strong advocate of Putin’s peace plan, who addressed the crowd of about 15,000 [...]. Local officials identified the bomber as 46-year old Shakhida Baimuratova, a rebel fighter whose husband was killed in 1999 during the conflict.10

This extract refers to a suicide attack carried out in May 2003, whose clear intention was to kill Akhmad Kadyrov, who was at the time the person with every chance of becoming President of the Republic of Chechnya, the rival administration of the nationalist CRI. A month before, a new constitution replacing the separatist one of 1992 had been passed in a referendum vote, thus questioning the legitimacy of the government of Aslan Maskhadov. Despite the fact that their forces had been incapable of impeding the referendum, the Islamist guerrillas were indeed capable of launching a series of attacks that hindered the process and cast doubt on the official Russian account that argued that the passing of the new constitution and formation of a new government signaled the end of the war. In this context, a “logical” explication was offered for the insurgency’s own violence, since, first, it not only responded to a collective aggression against Chechen sovereignty – represented by Kadyrov – but also to an individual one against a citizen of “our” country; so, accordingly, Baimuratov’s widow had adopted a combatant role. One of the essential characteristics of the construction of “us” resides in the fact that our history and acts are loaded with comprehensible reasons, whereas the “others” act without a cause worthy of the name (Alba Rico, 2015).

The small mountainous republic of Chechnya has been ravaged by conflict since 1994, with just three years of relative peace after the first Russian invasion of the region ended in August 1996 and the second began in October 1999.11

Another logical explication for Chechen Islamist violence, which helps to place the actors involved in the action, is that it was the only alternative for reestablishing the prior status quo. According to the KC, the only brief moment of calm in the region was when Russian domination did not exist – the tumultuous inter-war period – interrupted by a foreign “invasion”, a term that in and of itself possesses a high load of agency: invasions are in themselves aggressions.12 The strategy of intertextuality. What is understood by intertextuality is the relating of a discourse to another extraneous one (Kristeva, 2001; Todorov, 1998) which, together, form a new discourse; fragments that a reader glimpses in a text which belong to, or recall, other previous ones. In other

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8 According to Van Dijk (2009), contexts are subjective moments, whose relevance is defined by those participating in the situation. Given that the events selected received ample, in-depth coverage on KC, suitable contexts relevant to the Chechen Islamist guerrillas were taken into account.

9 As is typical in CDA, texts “are selected according to the interests of the analysts, where perhaps they have observed ideology in operation” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, 207).


12 Terminological controversies are essential in discourses justifying violence – or in any other political exercise (Laclau, 1996) – and have parallels in other armed conflicts (Van den Broek, 2015). Thus, the Chechen Islamists provided ample proof of their attempts to appropriate language, calling the Russian soldiers “terrorists” or regarding the intervention of Moscow as an “invasion”; both concepts were, in turn, used by the Kremlin to describe the Chechen combatants and the jihadist operation of 1999 in Dagestan.
words, intertextuality is “the presence of elements of some texts inside another one” (Fairclough, 2003, 39). The selection of these elements, called subtexts, necessarily involves an ideological attitude, inasmuch as “intertextuality is inevitably selective with respect to what is included and what is excluded from the events and texts represented” (Fairclough, 2003, 52). Seen from a wider viewpoint, all creative production can be regarded as intertextual, insofar as nothing emerges from the sterile vacuum of imagination. However, and while recognizing such limitations, a restricted vision of intertextuality grounded in linguistics was employed here, focusing solely on devices such as citation, mention, and allusion (Zavala, 1999).

According to Mowsar Barayev, Chechen fighters have the situation under their total control. 13

Maskhadov has distanced himself from the attack, offering his condolences to the victims’ families. 14

In this case, both quotes correspond to texts covering the Dubrovka Theater hostage crisis in October 2002. During a play, a group of Chechen insurgents stormed the theater and took the audience hostage for several days. In the course of the questionable rescue operation carried out by the Russian security forces, using a gas whose composition was kept under wraps and which was partly blamed for the tragedy, more than 150 people died, including Russian civilians and Chechen militants. The first extract is an example of how the coverage of the attack was constructed: using the insurgency’s own sources. Thus, it was a constant that the relevant actors, like Mowsar Barayev, the leader of the operation, and Aslan Maskhadov, President of the CRI, made their own statements that then went on to form part of the official Chechen account. But with a revealing appreciation: at the time, institutionalism was still represented by secular nationalism, and the official proclamation of the Caucasus Emirate, the Islamist organization that would virtually replace the RCI, was still five years away. Thus, the KC offered two different versions of the violence: the Islamist guerrillas’ rendition for their followers who wanted to know that “the situation was under control” versus the contradictory information supplied by the Russian media; and the nationalist and institutional account, concerned that the international community might associate the hostage-taking with terrorist operations like that of 9/11. This discursive ambivalence echoed the circumstantial debate within the opposition to Russia and which prevailed for several years more. 15

But, furthermore, it was customary that when the Chechen’s own violence had to be presented with greater finesse, this coincided with the posting of communiqués or interviews with the foremost members of the government of the CRI or of the insurgency, such as the then minister Akhmed Zakayev, President Aslan Maskhadov, and the Mujahideen leader Shamil Basayev. This led to these controversial events being narrated in the first person by the allied camp, while the arguments of the enemy were systematically omitted.

3.2.2. Emphasize their bad properties/ actions

Unification of perspective or point of view. This device is the result of the “strategy of intertextuality”, but instead of presenting a situation in which one or several quotes or allusions ideologically guide the discourse, what is being referred to here is a general tendency in the text, where the great majority or all of the sources or allusions point to a sole point of view, disregarding other possible discourses that could flesh out or corroborate the reasons behind the violence. “Inherent in the notions of ideology, attitudes and the specific opinions based on them is the notion of ‘position’. Events are described and evaluated from the position, point of view or perspective of the speaker” (Van Dijk, 1998a, 43).

That war in [sic] ended in 1996, after which Chechnya had de facto independence from Russian control. But Russian forces went storming back in to the region in October 1999. 16

The outbreak of war in 1999 is an event on which there currently exist different views – a strategy to promote the image of Vladimir Putin; the national–popular necessity to construct the limits of a new Russia; a consequence of the widespread instability in Chechnya due to the CRI’s loss of authority; a counter-terrorist operation in the face of the challenge posed by Al-Qaeda; etc. – and its outcome was influenced by multiple variables. However, the Chechen Islamist guerrillas ignored all those explications that might have implied a certain degree of responsibility of their own, placing their discourse in the frame of invasion. The insistence on this account during the Dubrovka Theater hostage crisis contributed to fostering the idea that the operation was justified (from the point of view of the Islamist

15 There is thus a paradox that made the discourses of the two different national sentiments relatively compatible: that of those who advocated for a Western-style secular nation-state for Chechnya; and that of those who defended a theocratic government of a regional character for the Muslim Caucasus. To this effect, it must be borne in mind that Movladi Udugov, the then director of the KC, had formed part of the administration of the CRI, insofar as he had been Prime Minister from 1996 to 1997, but after the outbreak of the second war he provided ample proof of his rapport with the Islamist guerrillas. Neither this about-turn nor the bitter feuds between both factions, noted above, prevented Udugov – and his website – from treating the government of Maskhadov as an ally against the common enemy: Russia. Even so, this alliance came up against a hurdle that was difficult to overcome: while the discourse of the legally elected President attempted to build a rapprochement with the “international community” (Radnitz, 2006), the KC strongly criticized the West and, above all, the US, the main culprit of the contemporary occupations of Muslim Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus, while on the home front the agency tried to underscore the positive aspects of the government of Maskhadov and conceal its shortcomings, on the international stage it did not hesitate to “boycott” the “pro-Western” strategy implemented by the Chechen administration. Proof of this was the publication on 27 January 2004 of an article entitled, “The US is now in the hands of a group of extremists,” in which the agency had no qualms about describing the Americans as “criminal agents” and “extremists” incapable of respecting international treaties.
insurgency), or, at best, attenuated (from the viewpoint of the secular nationalists).

Opposition politicians said the attack underscored Moscow's weak control over the predominantly Muslim province.\(^{17}\)

In this quote, the campaign of attacks suffered by Russia as a result of the passing of the constitution of 2003 is presented from the perspective of political opposition. The Russian viewpoint was only admissible when it served to underpin the opposition's vision of the war. As a matter of fact, in that same text Vladimir Putin's statements only appear in a paraphrased form, preceded by the word "defiant", with clearly pejorative undertones.

Lastly, other information that contextualized Chechen Islamist violence was described from just one perspective – that favoring the Chechens' own theses – including the violation of human rights by the Russians, war reports, or the alleged link between the guerrillas and Al-Qaeda.

Agency, responsibility, and blame for the acts. In the same manner as agency is useful for attributing merits, it can also be used to apportion blame, employing identical mechanisms: by localizing and characterizing the actors in the discourse. Nonetheless, this can be achieved not only by narrating and describing their acts, but also through the ordination of words, predication, and lexical selection.

The incident comes as Russia is launching a crackdown in the republic following the seizing of hundreds of hostages last week in Moscow by a group of heavily armed Chechens.\(^{18}\)

Capture of civilians in Moscow, the capital of the aggressor country, is the consequence of the mass and purposeful extermination of civilian population not only in the capital, but also in all other cities and villages of the victimized country. Whatever outcome the incident will have, the whole responsibility will fully lie on those who unleashed the criminal war against the Chechen people.\(^{19}\)

The representative of the President of CRI A. Maskhadov in RF, S. Maigov stated in his brief interview with Grani.ru news agency about the explosion in Iliskhan-Yourt – 'We are the witnesses of the escalation of violence in Chechnya. Obviously, this is the consequence of the fact that Kremlin did not succeed in implementing the declared promises in the case of the success of referendum. [...] This is response to that terror against Chechen people.'\(^{20}\)

Shaheds do not resort to personal revenge. They were taking revenge for our desecrated religion, for our entire nation, for our land, and for the entire Islamic Ummah.\(^{21}\)

But it would have been dishonest to the victims and irresponsible to the survivors if, having condemned the killers, we had failed to name the political causes of the tragedy and had failed to try – even without much hope for success – to once again urge the world to condemn the policy that makes tragedies like this not only possible, but inevitable.\(^{22}\)

In the Chechen Islamist discourse, it was commonplace to encounter linguistic constructions that suggested a "cause–effect" relationship between Russian violence and its own. Thus, typical expressions included “come as”, “the consequence”, “[the attack] is a response”, “taking revenge for”, or the explicit “the responsibility will lie” in order to emphasize that Russia was to blame for the guerrillas seizing theaters and schools, and bombing apartment blocks. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the storming of School No. 1 at Beslan, when a commando retained hundreds of pupils and teachers for several days, and whose outcome was similar to that of the Dubrovka Theater episode, with dozens of deaths after a failed rescue operation, was regarded as “inevitable”. In this case, Chechen violence was neither less brutal nor the consequence of another greater violence, foreign and primeval, but, furthermore, the assassination of Russian children ceased to be a (inevitable) voluntary act, given that the country's government had left the insurgents no alternative.

Liberal members of parliament are demanding an inquiry into the way the crisis was handled – in reference to the cold-blooded way in which Russian authorities opted to end the hostage-taking crisis.\(^{23}\)

Insha Allah, sooner or later, whether they want it or not, both the people and the government of Russia will be forced to stop this bloody slaughter.\(^{24}\)

[...] killed eight Russian invaders from among the so-called subdivision of combat reconnaissance of invaders. The detachment of aggressors was ambushed.\(^{25}\)

[...] carry out a special operation on the elimination of the formations of invaders and collaborators.\(^{26}\)


But in addition to justifying its own violence on the basis of its nature – since it was a response to another prior violence – the Chechen Islamist discourse also addressed another of the aforesaid sources of legitimacy: the procedure with which the said violence was used. Thus, the armed actions of the Russians were unlawful because they were “aggressions”, the product of an “invasion” launched “in cold blood” and with “bloody” consequences. They were not, therefore, as proportional and restrained as the Chechens’ own actions. *Local coherence*. As noted by Van Dijk (1998a, 36), local coherence is “one of the crucial semantic conditions of textuality” and “the property of sequential sentences (or propositions) in text and talk that defines why they ‘hang together’ or forro [sic] a ‘unity’, and do not constitute an arbitrary set of sentences.” So, some clauses only reveal their ideological meaning in relation to others and by means of a basic and repeatable structure (Van Dijk, 1998b). These schemes “may involve causal or conditional relations between the facts as represented by a model” (Van Dijk, 1998a, 36–37); viz., the reproduction of structural skeletons of texts that on their own guides the interpretation of a specific meaning, as with cause–effect relationships or contrasts (Van Dijk, 1998b).

Movsar Barayev’s assistant told during his interview to Kavkaz Center over the phone at about 10:00 AM Moscow Time that they are getting ready to release 30 foreigners and are warning the Russian command not to shoot at the hostages. Movsar Barayev reported to Kavkaz Center that General Aslakhanov left him a phone number of the Russian headquarters, where Mr. Barayev is going to call. He already called this number once, but did not get through.27

At least 117 hostages and around 50 Chechen hostage-takers were killed, most of them gassed to death by Russian forces in an assault on the theatre where more than 800 people were taken by the militants on Wednesday. Zakayev was in Denmark as an envoy of rebel Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov, who on Monday again said he was prepared for negotiations with Moscow to put an end to the bloodshed in the tiny breakaway republic.28

After the theatre siege, France and other Western states urged Moscow to talk with the rebels. But Yastrezhemsky echoed President Vladimir Putin’s longstanding rejection of any talks with “terrorists”.29

Some of the texts included in the sample achieve discursive coherence by contrasting two consecutive clauses that express “our” good deeds, before underscoring the wrongdoings of the “other”. The order of the sentences stresses the coherence of the second clause – that which places the blame on the Russians or extols the Chechens. In the first of the aforementioned cases, this contrast was achieved when the KC informed that the hostage-takers who had stormed the Dubrovka Theater claimed that they were willing to free a number of hostages, but for this to happen they needed a direct line to the Kremlin, which never replied. Both clauses attempt to express the will of the Chechen guerrillas to find a negotiated solution to the conflict, whereas the Russians continued stubbornly to refuse to reach a compromise. This is also illustrated, more clearly if possible, in the following two quotes, in which it was explained that Moscow did not negotiate with Maskhadov on the principle of “do not negotiate with terrorists”.

3.2.3. Mitigate our bad properties/actions

**Modalization (verbal).** Modalization is a grammatical device that, on specific occasions, is used to explain the degree of confidence with which the speaker transmits a “truth”. Thus, when the particle that expresses that degree of confidence is a verb – generally, modal verbs that act as auxiliaries to others – the phenomenon is usually described as “verbal modalization”, the verbs “to be able to” or “to have to” being normally used, or others in their conditional form (Fairclough, 1992). In the discourse employed by the Chechens to justify their own violence, modalization was used to mitigate the offences of the insurgency, since the degree of confidence of their own wrongdoings was narrated with a level of certainty that was lower than the usual force with which they broached “Russian crimes”.

If the fact that the theater has really been seized by Chechens confirms [sic], then it must be considered as the gesture of extreme despair.30

In this proposition, two elements expressing uncertainty (if/must + be) as regards how the Dubrovka Theater hostage crisis should be interpreted are introduced. The clause begins with a conditional form, expressing doubts about whether the action was really the work of Chechen insurgents, and then claims that, if so, it could only be interpreted as a gesture of extreme despair, presupposing that this was the product of Russian criminality. A personal act of violence, expressed with uncertainty, is thus eclipsed by that of the enemy which was indeed presented as self-evident.

On other occasions, modal markers were used in the discourse under study (paraphrasing). Attributions of third-party statements not only catered to the “strategy of intertextuality” or the “unification of perspective”, but, when these were made erroneously, the discourse could be restructured for ideological purposes (Fairclough, 1992), manipulating statements to its own benefit or discrediting the sources of the enemy:

Tass said in a separate report, without giving a source, that some teachers may have been killed.31

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The Russian news agency TASS stated that some teachers were killed during the Beslan School No. 1 hostage crisis, but in order to undermine the credibility of the press release the Chechen Islamists stressed that the piece was not backed by any source. This being a reasonable demand that, on the other hand, they never made with regard to the original news items appearing on the KC website.

3.2.4. Mitigate their good properties/actions

Semantic shift. What is meant by semantic shift is the resignification and redirection of specific propositions. Albeit commonly used in linguistics to refer to a form of lexical evolution, this phenomenon is also employed as a discursive tool to “shift” a proposition with a positive ideological strategy toward a negative one. In some instances, it is presented using paralipsis (Van Dijk, 1998a), but in the texts analyzed here it is found more frequently in contrasts similar to those of “local coherence”. In the case in point, however, the sequential propositions both refer to the enemy and are connected by nexuses like the preposition “but”, which takes on specific ideological connotations here by blaming Russia for a violence that outweighed any good deed of which it might have been capable.

He also reported that General Aslakhanov contacted him over the phone and offered Ruslan Khasbulatov as the negotiator. But the Mujahideen rejected that proposal, stating that Khasbulatov is stained with the blood of the Chechen people.32

For instance, this material mentions that Putin keeps repeating over and over again that Al-Qaeda is involved in these acts on the Russian soil. But international intelligence agencies are casting doubts on the proofs that he brings to back his point of view with.33

In the first quote, after several hours during which the guerrillas who seized the Dubrovka Theater denounced Russia’s refusal to negotiate, the commando’s spokesman reported that the Kremlin had already got in contact with them for that purpose. This proposition, which shows the conciliatory spirit of the enemy, is followed by another disbeliefing it. It is thus possible to observe the discursive shift that starts with the conjunction “but” and ends with the explicit expression “stained with the blood of the Chechen people”. In the second quote, a similar structure (a positive proposition mitigated by another negative one) is applied, this time to debunk the basic arguments with which the Kremlin justified the second war.

Russian sources reported that Putin’s “amnesty” will apply to the individuals who committed “acts dangerous for the public within the borders of the former Chechen-Ingushetian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic over the period starting August 1, 1993, to the day when the State Duma resolution takes effect”. At the same time it was especially stressed that those who “stopped armed resistance or who voluntarily turned in their weapons and military equipment before 12:00 AM August 1, 2003” will fall under amnesty. […] “The so-called ‘amnesty’ that Putin is talking about has legally nothing to do with the Chechen citizens or the Chechen State. From the Shariah viewpoint, as well as from the viewpoint of the so-called ‘international community’, this is a totally illegitimate act that the Kremlin is doing, it has [a] purely propagandistic and totally speculative nature aimed to plant Moscow’s allegations in the minds of the people that Chechnya is allegedly a part of Russia”.34

Lastly, another form of semantic shift that is observed in the Chechen Islamist discourse occurred on a structural level, rather than by means of conjunctive lexical markers. Thus, at the beginning of the extract Vladimir Putin’s intention to offer an amnesty to political prisoners and insurgents who laid down their arms is described in detail. Two paragraphs further on, in contrast, Commander Sahad, a member of the State Defense Council (Majlis al-Shura), is cited, contending that from the point of view of both Islamic Law and the international community the amnesty was illegitimate, propagandistic, and speculative. In this manner, an authoritative argument discrediting a positive action of the enemy is introduced to ideologically “shift” the discourse in order to complete the last vertex of the ideological square.

4. Conclusions

On the whole, the Chechen Islamist guerrillas justified their own violence by constructing an “us” free from any responsibility for the tragedies that they provoked, and a criminal “other” to blame for the aggression giving rise to the conflict; something that is very common in war propaganda:

The construction of the Enemy is accompanied by the construction of the identity of the Self as clearly antagonistic to the Enemy’s identity. In this process, not only is the radical otherness of the Enemy emphasized, but also the Enemy is presented as a threat to ‘our own’ identity. Ironically (…) the evilness of the Enemy is a necessary condition for the articulation of the goodness of the Self (Carpentier, 2007, 03).

Chechen armed actions were always in legitimate self-defense against the Russian “invasion” of their territory, even when the victims were civilians, who were considered the Government’s accomplices.35 To this end, all direct references to the Russian discourse were omitted, and when it did indeed appear it was disparaged. By the same token, Russian actions that audiences might have interpreted as positive were always presented as an illusion or driven by covert, malicious intentions. Conversely, the Chechen

separatists – nationalists and Islamists – were habitually depicted as noble victims pushed by the circumstances to storm theaters and schools and bomb buildings. This unity of action is noteworthy to the extent that, for years, both factions had been immersed in a struggle to monopolize the separatist movement. However, this propaganda strategy ultimately backfired in 2007, when Doku Umarov proclaimed the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate and the KC published a series of articles accusing Akhmed Zakayev, the CRI’s representative in exile, of treason and complicity with Russia (Tarín Sanz, 2017).

Although this narrative is commonplace in war propaganda (Huici Módenes, 2010), the Chechen Islamist discourse at the time (between 2001 and 2005) displayed some characteristics that distanced it from conventional jihadist narratives. First, the Chechens’ own violence was seemingly devoid of any exhibitionism, as was not the case in the contemporary Iraq of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi or currently in the Islamic State. On the contrary, the violence was occasionally presented as a lesser evil, as the inevitable consequence of Russian military aggression. This exceptionality could have been due to multiple factors, one of which being that, at that moment, the legitimate authority of the Chechen separatist movement was still wielded by the secular nationalist Aslan Maskhadov. Controversial though his mandate was, and in spite of the fact that for some authors he was in cahoots with the Islamists, the truth is that Maskhadov was an actor more inclined to negotiate and implement peace policies than his Islamist successors (Rivas Otero & Tarín Sanz, 2016). Therefore, Islamist rhetoric had to coexist with a more cautious Westernized discourse, attentive to the international community, something that contributed to tempering the presentation of its own violence.36 As matter of fact, in that period the narratives framed in the deontology theory were few and far between, which, according to ‘O’Boyle (2002), is typical of jihadist groups and assumes the existence of a set of superior (divine) moral principles that should never be violated, even if the consequences are beneficial. Instead, the central arguments have more to do with human motives – a widow of the conflict who blows herself up, a nation defending itself against an aggression – than divine ones – a mandate of Allah to punish the violence of the infidels. This does not mean to say that religious rhetoric was conspicuous by its absence – in fact, it is one of the differences between the first and second war (Radnitz, 2006) – but that, in comparison with other conflicts involving jihadist elements, it had to be played down since it coexisted with the nationalist narratives still controlled by the executive power.

In short, the Chechen war discourse could serve as a compass for taking our bearings in the process of progressive Islamization that affected the region after the first war,37 since it reflects some of the main changes and contradictions that gradually transformed the separatist movement, as well as contributing to unraveling the power relations, political disputes, and social imaginaries (in the process of being) shared by the Chechen opposition to Russia.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

References


36 Something especially relevant to a culture that had built around itself – with “Orientalist” help from Russian intellectuals – a warrior myth (Johnston, 2008) which justified, on its own, the political violence (Campana, 2009).

37 For a deeper understanding of this process, see Akaev (2014),