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The Ethnic Russian as an Enemy of Islam: Frame Analysis of the Kavkaz Center News Agency (2001–2004)

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ABSTRACT

Typically, when analysing contemporary Russian–Chechen conflicts, the relegation of the nationalist struggle to a secondary role by the religious battle waged by the North Caucasus insurgency is pinpointed as one of the fundamental differences between the First and Second War in Chechnya. This article discusses how it was reflected in one of the most important media of the Chechen Islamist insurgency: the Kavkaz Center. To this end, 2859 English language news items posted on the website during 2001–04 were reviewed using media frame analysis.

1. Introduction

Typically, when analysing contemporary Russian–Chechen conflicts, the relegation of the nationalist struggle to a secondary role by the religious battle waged by the North Caucasus insurgency is pinpointed as one of the fundamental differences between the First and Second War in Chechnya. Different authors (Moore and Tumelty 2009, Yamelianova 2010, Albert 2014, Fagan 2014) have adduced multiple socio-economic, political and cultural causes to explain this change of tack, but how the guerrilla media reflected this process is an issue that has not received so much attention. How did the jihadist Chechen propaganda function during this period? What discourses competed for the hegemony of the movement? This article is grounded in a very specific research topic, placing a question mark on the discourses with which the Chechen jihadists attempted to convince their international target audiences that Russia was, in reality, a religious enemy and not just a national one. In brief, how was the social imaginary of the ethnic Russian¹ as an enemy of Islam built?² In this study, it is held that this was the main rhetorical resource employed by the jihadist guerrillas to bolster their position and reshape how the conflict was generally interpreted abroad,

above and beyond direct criticism of the nationalist faction which, quite to the contrary, they continued to respect during the initial years of the conflict.³

In order to conduct this research, a number of selection criteria relating to both the object of study and the periodicity and methodology were defined. As regards the object of study, the website of the Kavkaz Center (KC), the most prominent news agency of the jihadist faction of the Chechen guerrillas, was chosen. It should be stressed that the best part of the English literature on the KC solely refers to the website as an information source, and the few studies that attribute it a leading role have usually done so in a descriptive way and, as a rule, as part of a broader universe (Knowles 2008, Simons 2010, Campana and Ducol 2015, Vergani and Zuev 2015). Therefore, this is one of the few English language articles to conduct an in-depth analysis of its content, besides the work of Tarín Sanz (2017a), which studies the discourse that the agency promoted to justify the violence. Furthermore, and due to the fact that what interests us here is to address how the propaganda destined for the Chechen diaspora and the Western Muslim community was designed, only its English content was analysed.⁴

The study period spans four years, from September 2001 to September 2004, since it was a moment of special importance for both global jihadism and the local insurgencies. Firstly, those years were marked by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as well as the subsequent military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. With respect to the local front, the universe begins with the first news that the KC posted in English and continues with events as exceptional as the hostage-taking at the Dubrovka Theatre, the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of Chechnya and the ensuing campaign of terrorist attacks, the assassination of Akhmad Kadyrov, and the Beslan school massacre. A total of 2859 entries were analysed.

Lastly, a specific application of media frame analysis, with a qualitative approach, whose parameters and design will be described below, was used.

2. Theoretical Framework

Over the past decade, the field of political and Internet studies has aroused greater interest, resulting in a proliferation of studies. Some of the lines of research that have received most attention have to do with political participation on the Web (Vissers and Stolle 2014, Feezell *et al.* 2016), the creation of alternative media (Sullivan *et al.* 2011, Barassi 2013), and even the analysis of social movements spawned by new technologies (Morell 2012, McDonald 2015). This thematic variety gradually disappears when digital political activism is also religious and, in particular, Islamic. Although there are always exceptions to the rule, the majority of the literature on political Islam and the Internet focuses on the processes of radicalisation and recruitment (Torres-Soriano 2014, Nilsson 2015, Wadhwa and Bhatia 2015).

Therefore, there are certain lacunae in the analyses of the uses to which Islamic activism has put the Internet, and its objectives, which, however, are present in research into secular politics. This is somewhat surprising bearing in mind that, in reality, the online behaviour and profiles of those who frequently access political content on the Internet are similar for Westerners and Muslims alike (Herbert 2009, Lerner 2010, Sanaktekin *et al.* 2013, Klausen 2015).

In this regard, it may be appropriate to resort to Marxist critical theories of communication and cultural studies, so skilfully employed when interpreting Western politics. According to these currents, the mass media are conceived, above all, as hypodermic needles, as crucial spaces of construction and reproduction of cultural hegemony (Carpentier 2007), in the terms in which Antonio Gramsci understood the issue. This hegemony that stabilises social progress is basically fostered by those meanings that are understood as common sense, since 'the struggle for ideological and political hegemony is thus always the struggle for the appropriation of the terms which are "spontaneously" experienced as "apolitical", as transcending political boundaries' (Zizek 2008, p. 15). In other words, true ideology is that which does not need to be vindicated (Moruno 2015), and perhaps it is for this reason that Ellul (1973), one of the leading communication theorists, argues that propaganda does not always intend to convert its audience into militants of a doctrine, but in most cases is content with triggering in them a specific change in attitude. Thus, the idea is to consider Islamist propaganda websites also as tools for waging the war of positions, and not only for the struggle of movements (Hall 1996, Gramsci 2000).

The history of the Russian–Chechen conflicts can be understood in terms of the contention of common senses. There are plenty of examples in Russian popular culture which indicate that some imaginaries of the ethnic Chechen – good savage, seasoned, chaotic, savage, merciless, and violent – have been accepted as the norm, thanks above all to the literature and the film industry (Ram 1999, Karpushina 2002, Smith 2005, Barrenetxea Marañón 2012). In the opposing camp, the situation was more complex, and between the First and Second Russian–Chechen Wars the jihadist guerrillas had to confront many opponents with different ideas of nationbuilding: traditionalists, nationalists and 'pro-Russians' (Campana 2006). Admittedly, the characterisation of the ethnic Russian as an enemy was at the time a matter of common sense, which had been nurtured in the communities of the North Caucasus for centuries. Nonetheless, this antagonistic construction must have mutated at some point from the colonial perspective to the religious kind. Or, in other words, in the eyes of the diaspora and the Western Muslim community Russia had to cease being a mere occupant to also become an opponent of Islam. It is relevant here to recover the thoughts of Schmitt (2007) on the concept of the political, whose specificity – according to the German – lies in the capacity of the contenders to define the 'friend-enemy' dichotomy. But, at the time, the jihadist guerrillas not only strived to denote the enemy – to involve themselves in politics – but also to

construct this imaginary on the basis of concrete arguments and characteristics that allowed them, moreover, to establish an 'us' (Mouffe 1995).

In this process, the guerrilla media played an important role, as had usually been the case with other similar groups. Prominent jihadist leaders had already proclaimed the importance of spreading the conflict to the media and especially the Internet (Knowles 2008, Klausen 2015). For them, the Web had always been an ideological wellspring (Nesser 2011), rather than an instruction manual for the 'perfect terrorist'. In this regard, noteworthy is the work of Branson (2014) who, with a theoretical approach similar to the one outlined in this article, interprets the construction of the Tunisian Salafi virtual community as an opportunity to make its discourse known to public opinion, rather than a recruitment tool. A perspective that has proved itself to be equally valid in other cases, such as that of the jihadist websites in Indonesia (Yang Hui 2010).

Returning to the object of study, the advent of the KC can also be understood from the standpoint of the need to present the vision of the jihadist guerrillas to the outside world. During the study period, Russia could be seen as an actor close to the Muslim community, due to its opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its links to the Arab League, for which reason it was crucial for Chechen jihadism to challenge that vision, presenting the Second Russian-Chechen War as just another Western operation against Muslims; versus a jihadist public agenda that singled out Israel and the US as its chief adversaries, in the framework of the existence of nearby and distant enemies (Vergani 2014) the KC also tried to construct a specific imaginary of the ethnic Russian in order to reconcile it with that 'inverted axis of evil'. This discourse – the 'glocal' proposal to associate global struggles with local elements of the conflict – was a constant in the propaganda strategies of the North Caucasus jihadists during this period (Campana and Ducol 2015). The notion that the aim of launching an English language version – the object of study here – was to recruit European Muslims for the struggle against Russia does not seem so tenable; rather the idea was to frame an alternative discourse to the one wielded by the other factions and to drum up support for the jihadist cause. In short, to construct a new common sense of what Russia should mean for the diaspora and Western Muslims.

3. The war of Factions: Secularism, Islamism and Russian Sovereignty

The period in which this study is framed was marked, among other aspects, by two strategic changes with respect to the First Russian-Chechen War: for the jihadist guerrillas' part, the execution of massive and spectacular terrorist attacks, such as the hostage-taking at the Dubrovka Theatre and Beslan School No. 1, and for the Russian state's part, the implementation of policies aimed at restructuring the Chechen administration and the incorporation of local civil servants in spaces of power. Both processes can only be understood in the framework

of the different warring factions that were then vying for political hegemony in Chechnya⁵: secular nationalists (members of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria⁶ and of some of the parallel guerrilla groups), Islamists (traditionalist Sufis and jihadist insurgencies), and 'pro-Russian' groups (gradually assimilated into the new Republic of Chechnya).⁷

Contrary to appearances, on the basis of a superficial analysis the Islamisation of the Chechen resistance against Russia was a long-term process. When the Soviet Union collapsed at the beginning of the 1990s, besides the proliferation of nationalist projects – both in the fledgling Russian Federation and in the ex-Soviet peripheries – there was also a gradual religious revival to the detriment of official atheism; in the Caucasus, this was of an Islamic character, promoted in part by the opening of foundations financed from abroad (Garner 2013). In addition to foreign private capital, the main actors in the conflict also included a minority group of local preachers, such as the Chechen Islam Khalimov or the Dagestanis Akhmed Atayev and the Kebedov brothers, who returned from Central Asia and the Middle East to disseminate Salafism, a doctrine that was fairly popular in other parts,⁸ but with shallow roots in the distant mountains of the Caucasus⁹ (Moore and Tumelty 2008). Nevertheless, the All-National Congress of the Chechen People (NCChP), the political spearhead of the independence movement, was basically made up of secular nationalists instructed in the Soviet army or in the Communist Party, like Dzhokhar Dudayev himself, who at the time publically refused – albeit diplomatically – to subordinate the laws of the nascent CCRI to different Koranic interpretations (Abubakarov 1998).

Besides the initial determination shown by Dudayev, it was the outbreak of the First Russian-Chechen War that suspended the religious debate, at least during the following two years. Using the excuse of the common enemy of the nation, the then president managed to articulate the different feelings existing in the country (Tarín Sanz 2017b). To this end, however, he was obliged to conclude deals with some Islamist sectors and to employ part of their religious rhetoric, underscoring Islam as an inextricable element of the Chechen national identity. Garner (2013) summarises this paradox in the following way: 'the leadership employed Islamist rhetoric instrumentally to mobilise the population and inspire them to war against Russia, but the war itself empowered radical leaders with more serious Islamist aspirations' (p. 421).

Nor did the end of the war and the substitution of Dudayev – murdered by the Russian army – by the charismatic nationalist serviceman Aslan Maskhadov, manage to halt the Islamist advance. Quite the opposite, in fact, insofar as the social, economic, and environmental devastation caused by the conflict opened the way for numerous armed groups – former combatants who neither renounced the use of force nor joined the regular security forces, whose agendas envisaged political or merely criminal objectives – who defying the authorities of the CRI plunged the region into chaos yet again (Sagramoso 2012). Notwithstanding the fact that Maskhadov had won a resounding victory over

Zelimkham Yandarbiyev and Shamil Basayev (Orttung 2000), his two Islamic rivals, in the 1997 elections, which could have been understood as renewed vote of confidence for the secular nationalist project, his popularity soon began to wane in view of his inability to impose public law and order (Galeotti 2002, Rivas Otero and Tarín Sanz 2017). And those who best capitalised on the subsequent turmoil were the jihadist and 'pro-Russian' factions.¹⁰ The former, in addition to contradicting the secularism of Maskhadov,¹¹ were also successful in their dispute with Sufi Islamism, which they accused of promoting a 'false' Islam and collaborating with the warlords, while also having the knack of offering a self-assured image, which the CRI lacked (Souleimanov 2015). And, meanwhile, the latter took advantage of the situation to call for and justify Russian intervention.

It was precisely the tension between the secular government and the jihadist groups that triggered the Russian intervention of 1999. The continual kidnappings of Russian and foreign civilians (Winslow *et al.* 2013), the suspicious explosions in the apartment blocks of Buynaksk, Volgodonsk, and Moscow (Wood 2005), and Shamil Basayev and his Mujahideen's foray into Dagestan (Kudryavtsev 2000) were planned and executed without consulting the government of Maskhadov, thus clearly reflecting the lack of consensus among the different factions. By the same token, the fact that the merger between *Chechenpress*, the official nationalist mouthpiece of the CRI, and the *Kavkaz Center* (KC), the most representative media outlet of the jihadist insurgencies,¹² took place while the conflict escalated, clearly demonstrated the need to wage a battle of words, vying for common senses with which to interpret the nature of the enemy and the meaning of the war. As Campana and Ducol (2015) explain, 'It [The Internet] is also a space in which insurgents and incumbents fight to frame the dominant narrative over a particular conflict' (p. 2).

However, and even though the jihadisation of the conflict was gathering pace, this does not mean to say that it was always linear. Although the war openly distributed the positions at stake, the discursive strategy of the KC was not belligerent with the government of Maskhadov, but quite the reverse: it showed prudential respect for its management of affairs, focusing on spreading jihadism as an ideology that should coordinate the resistance against the (other) ethnic Russian (Tarín Sanz 2017a). For Maskhadov,¹³ this was not always an easy task since, due to events such as the hostage-taking at the Dubrovka Theatre and Beslan School No. 1, the jihadists held totally opposite views: while the CRI condemned the attacks and strived to appear before the international community as a moderate government, the KC justified the violence (*Ibidem*).

After the death of Maskhadov and the ascension to power of Umarov – another former nationalist – the latter proclaimed the Caucasus Emirate, considering that the national conflict has been supplanted by another of a regional and purely jihadist nature; an episode beyond the timeline of this study.

4. Methodology and Results

The general objective of this study is to analyse the basic narratives with which the jihadist guerrillas in the North Caucasus attempted to construct and reproduce what is referred to here as ‘the social imaginary of the ethnic Russian as an enemy of Islam’. That is to say, how – without making wider use of other strategies – the jihadists basically resorted to a specific characterisation of their opponent to consolidate their own position in a context of struggle against the country’s other identities vying for hegemony in Chechnya (during the first years of the Second Russian-Chechen War). The target audience analysed here is the diaspora and the Western Muslim community, one of the prime objectives of Chechen propaganda at the time, for which reason only the English language version of the KC was studied. Its intention was to encourage the jihadist guerrillas’ potential allies in the English speaking world to accept their acts and narratives, to the extent that it could influence the course of the conflict between the different warring factions.

Hence, the KC website, acknowledged as the insurgents’ chief mouthpiece at the time (Wilhelmsen 2005), was chosen as the object of study. The choice of a digital media outlet was motivated by the fact that it was the channel favoured by these groups (Campana and Ducol 2015)

Thus, 2,859 entries posted on the KC website from September 2001 to September 2004, a period that, as has already been argued, was of special importance for local and global jihadism, were considered analysable.

Since, in order to meet the study goal, the idea was to furnish a broad range of empirical resources that supported the proposed analyses, providing a large number of concrete examples of the narratives used by the guerrillas, it was deemed appropriate to employ a qualitative approach. Qualitative analyses ‘are more than a set of data-gathering techniques. It is a way of approaching the empirical world’ (Taylor *et al.* 2015, p. 7). Likewise, they allow us – without necessarily sacrificing scientific rigour – to understand, explain, and explore social phenomena in different ways, which reduce the likelihood of overlooking meanings that are more difficult to detect when they are transformed into numbers (Richards and Morse 2013). Lastly, over the past few decades qualitative approaches ‘are increasingly being understood as explicitly theory-dependent ways of describing, analyzing, and interpreting data’ (Talja 1999: 459), with particular efficiency when an attempt is made to apply them to the methodology proposed here; viz. media frame analysis (Altheide and Schneider 2013).

4.1. Media Frame Analysis and Political Islam

Whenever we interact, we strive to interpret what our interlocutor is trying to convey to us. We build a series of packages of meaning on the basis of which we understand reality. Since the 1950s, the quest for these parameters, or domains,

which allow us to perform this task of active decoding, has been known as 'framing'. This process can be defined as a set of presuppositions that facilitate, by means of concealment and emphasis, different events (Goffman 1974).

Albeit also a method of analysis applied to other social disciplines, framing has been particularly useful in communication studies, inasmuch as the very act of transmitting a vision of things involves it (Hartog and Verburg 1997). Thus, 'to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman 1993, p. 52).

Since the KC adopts the traditional digital newspaper format to disseminate a 'moral and intellectual credibility to be gained through the adoption of a hard news or news commentary format' (Knowles 2008, p. 365), this methodology keyed to the study of the media and, in particular, to their formally journalistic spaces, was adopted in this work. From this perspective, framing is the central organisational idea of news content, by means of which the webmasters of online media guide readers as to the ways in which the topics established in their agenda should be read. This is precisely the issue being addressed here: to unravel the hermeneutical schemes proposed by the KC as an agency that aspired to set itself up as an information benchmark of the Second Russian-Chechen War, in order to construct a new common sense in which Russia, far from being a political actor sympathetic to the *umma* or an occupant of the lands of the Caucasus, became a religious enemy for Muslims the world over.

The use of framing as a method to analyse mediations has a wide range of applications in the study of the interpretive schemes that pervade armed conflicts (Lakoff 1991, Butler 2009). One of these lines has to do with how the Western mass media address the phenomenon of violent political Islam. Generally speaking, these studies abound in details of how this type of coverage follows stable patterns, such as the inseparable combination of Islam and violence (Wicks 2006, Ewart 2012), discourses of fear and the clash of civilisations (Patrick 2014, Nevalsky 2015), and the need to implement draconian anti-terrorism policies (Brinson and Stohl 2012, Matthews 2015), among others. On the other hand, in the analysis of the discourses of violent Islamist organisations, framing is also one of the methodologies that in recent years have made the greatest contribution to understanding the hermeneutical rationales behind them (Wiktorowicz 2005).

Such is the case of the work of Kassim (2015), who elaborates a conceptual framework of Salafi jihadism, which is then applied to the African organisation Boko Haram, or that of Morris (2014), who compares the thought patterns of neo-Nazi and jihadist groups. More specifically, in his media research Drissel (2015) lists and describes the different frames that, via social networks, endeavour to construct the new Taliban in order to remedy the blow suffered after the North American intervention in 2001. For his part, Sändig (2015) resorts to

exploring the communiqués of Boko Haram, describing, in a similar vein, the frames that justify its acts of violence.

This work was conducted on the basis of the same descriptive methodology. However, this was achieved using three types of frames – diagnostic, prognostic and motivational – already established and successfully employed in other similar research (Karagiannis 2009, Page *et al.* 2011, Granzow 2015). The first refers to the identification of a problem that needs to be resolved and, accordingly, there is a shift in the conflict towards external actors – typically the enemy – to justify its actions; the second alludes to the proposals that could overcome the formulated problems; and the third endeavours to encourage audiences to take specific action (Benford and Snow 2000).

4.2. Diagnostic Framing

The KC places the origin of the conflict with Russia neither in the unilateral declaration of independence of the CRI in 1991, nor in the First Russian-Chechen War of 1994, but, further back, in the Tsarist and Soviet periods. This ideological recuperation of memory is used by the website for a dual purpose: to decry the long-standing repression suffered by the Muslims of the Caucasus at the hands of the Russians; and to link the current Federation to atheism and to one of the major milestones of the jihad in the 20th century: the invasion of Afghanistan by their Soviet predecessors. This ‘criminal past’ serves as a precedent and context for a superior and more urgent violence – i.e., the current violence – insofar as ‘Putin’s Russia has surpassed the demonized by history Stalin era of its existence [...] at least back then they were trying to maintain the likeness of legality, when they were committing atrocities against their own citizens.’ This quest for similarities between alleged past repressions and current ones, imagined as a linear continuity, is symbolically illustrated by the three Vladimirs who have charted the history of Russia and who, in some way, are presented as those responsible for the wrongs suffered by the region’s Muslim community: Prince Vladimir, who forcibly converted thousands of Muslims to Christianity; Lenin, a sacrilegious atheist; and Putin, one of the contemporary embodiments of Russian depravity.

This historical violence of Russians against Muslims (and not just against Chechens), which the violent necessarily have to assume as a true premise, is based on their natural degeneration as a people. This produces what Sousa Santos (2007) calls ‘abysmal thought’, whose basic characteristic is the metaphorical division of reality in two different, distant and opposing regions. For that matter, it could be argued that there exists an ‘abysmal line’ between the representations of Chechens/Muslims and Russians. The entry entitled, ‘The filthiest out of Allah’s creation’ is a clear example of this. It describes the trip that Ahmed Ibn-Fadlan, a member of embassy of the Abbasid Caliphate of Bagdad, made to the Bulgarian Volga, where he reportedly came into contact with the Tartar Vikings of Rus, the ancestors of present-day ethnic Russians:

Russes are the filthiest of Allah's creatures. [...] Every day they must wash their faces and heads and this they do in the dirtiest and filthiest fashion possible: to wit, every morning a girl servant brings a great basin of water; she offers this to her master and he washes his hands and face and his hair – he washes it and combs it out with a comb in the water; then he blows his nose and spits into the basin. When he has finished, the servant carries the basin to the next person, who does likewise.

Unlike the diagnostic framing proposed by secular nationalists, who were careful to recriminate the Kremlin, in the main, for the problems of Chechnya, the Islamist guerrillas laid the blame equally on the shoulders of the state's structures and the Russian people, since their condition 'does not relieve Russians who do not reside in Moscow from the responsibility, since they are submissively watching the tyranny committed by the Muscovites.' But, as has already been noted, the Russians are not only passive abettors of the policies of their government, but also appear as a biologically and culturally degenerate people:

The blood of a Chechen is a root of life, a rejuvenating elixir for Putin the vampire [...] The Chechen blood has become a cementing solution for the entire Russian nation, united around the 'national idea' of subduing Ichkeria. Headed by czar the vampire, Russia turned into a vampire country long time ago.

This esoteric discourse is not exclusive to the KC, but is deeply rooted in a religious rhetoric ingrained in modern Sunni Islam (Schuck 2013). Thus, there is room for stories about Russian 'bloodthirstiness', Putin as the devil's serf with incipient horns on his brow, or a sloppy phonological study in which it is claimed that the word 'Putin' conceptually recalls the adjectives 'miserable, quiet, dull, dark, sad, weak, and short', whereas 'Basayev' is associated with 'courageous, brave, big, majestic, good, loud, harsh, bright, strong, active, quick, mobile, short, and mighty', and Bin Laden with 'safe, cheerful, bright, quick, mobile, and short'.

This historically malign condition also projects an ideology that vertebrates the Russian people: 'Russism', a doctrine defined by the nationalist Dzhokhar Dudayev, but which has been appropriated by jihadism and involves 'a manifestation of predatory cruelty and violence towards one who is weak and defenseless and groveling before one who is stronger'.

Assiduously, and with the additional aim of associating Russia with Islam's prolonged struggle against Israel (Ismail 1998), 'Russism' is compared to Zionism.

Speaking about cruelty of the Russian society as a whole and of Russian invaders in Chechnya in particular, which is irrational and inconceivable for a sane mind, many Chechens have an opinion that a 'Judaic Zionist spirit' possessed the Russian body, like a demon or a genie possesses a man, making him a dangerous lunatic! In this particular case it is Zionism, which replaced the Orthodox Judaism in a deceptive way with its man-hating ideology.

Although, according to this frame, the cause behind the conflict between Russia and the Muslim world dates back centuries and is based on the natural depravity of its people, the guerrillas made the most of the existence of another frame in which Islam is locked in a continuous struggle with the West (Pisoiu 2013) and which revolves around the Arab–Israeli conflict and US foreign policy (Chomsky

2005), in order to include Russia in the 'inverted axis of evil', along with the nearby enemy (Israel) and the distant one (the US). As part of this process of inclusion, the agency also covers events far-removed from the North Caucasus conflict – such as the aforementioned Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Zionism – to reaffirm, among other aspects, its alleged commitment to the problems of the *umma* and to deepen hostility towards the West:

Zionists always attained sympathy and pity, resembling to the entire world about the fact that Adolph Hitler forced them to sew on yellow bandages to the clothing [...] However, Jews themselves decreed, that Palestinians must drive only in the machines with the yellow identification tags.

For its part, the US is frequently depicted as the invader in the wars with the Islamic territories of Afghanistan and Iraq. In this way, the agency presents the US authorities as criminal agents, extremists – intentionally using the same terminology that the Western mass media employ to describe the Mujahideen – incapable of complying with the international treaties that they themselves sign, modifying the status of prisoners of war, and even subjecting them to cruel tortures.

These events serve as a framework of reference to compare Russian actions against Muslims with those of their other enemies. It is also worth highlighting that in the chosen study period Russian diplomacy insisted before the international community that the intervention in Chechnya was being carried out under the same criteria as those of the US 'war on terror' (Lapidus 2002, Dannreuther and March 2008), and accordingly the guerrillas took up the baton, interpreting it as yet another Western operation against Islam.

This alleged link between Russia and the West could have been of special interest to the target audience of the English language version of the KC, as well as refuting part of the secular nationalist narrative concerned with forging closer links with the West seen as a potential ally against Moscow (Tarín Sanz 2017b).

Besides, in this context, in which Russian and Western initiatives complement each other, it is widely held that the war in Afghanistan, led by the US since 2001, is a prolongation of the Soviet invasion of the 1980s. According to this account, the US and Russia are one and the same since their common ambition is the quest for power through a number of wars that pursue the same interests: 'One is exterminating nations in the man-hating war in the Caucasus, and the other one is doing it in faraway Afghanistan and Iraq. But since nations that practice Islam are defined as the enemies, then it's not that difficult to unite combat zones'.

4.3. Prognostic Framing

Once the problem has been framed (diagnostic framing), summarised in the suffering caused by the succession of historical aggressions of the Russian people against the Muslims of the Caucasus, the discourse of the guerrillas also allows

us to frame its possible solution (prognostic framing). This rests on two pillars: Chechen sovereignty and the enforcement of a specific vision of Islamic laws.

With respect to the former, the path taken is the opposite to that followed in the previous section, and as a result of the construction of the enemy, that of 'us' is thus deduced. In the words of Hernández-Santaolalla (2011, p. 758), 'the key' is 'to present the enemy as the very embodiment of Evil, which by extension results in recognizing one's own side as the team of Good, and its leader as an authentic hero savior (or even god)'. To a great extent, this representation is grounded in the mythical imaginary of the aforementioned resistant and savage warrior. Thus, the KC celebrated the New Year in 2004 by announcing 'a holiday of the resistance' and recalling the battles won by the insurgents over the previous months. This mythology of the unflagging courage shown by Chechen Muslims also leads to discourses that claim that the guerrillas are 'better armed than ever' and diligently instructed in the Koran, in line with the romantic mysticism of the Mujahideen. Whereas the Russians and their allies are demonic, natural born cowards, the Chechen Mujahideen are valiant and noble warriors:

The Mujahideen who were defending the Chechen capital back in January 2002 were telling how Chechen ladies who were selling things and other traders were crawling across the frontline in one of the Districts of Jokhar to set up mobile markets and sell their goodies to the residents of the capital who were hiding in basements and to Chechen fighters. At the same time the ladies were claiming that they felt completely secure on the territory controlled by the Mujahideen, rather than [*sic*] on the other side.

However, in response to particular events – in which the struggle for the hegemony of the resistance against Russia was still unfolding – the English language version of the KC continued to employ discourses that were fairly moderate in comparison with the narrative of international jihadism and which could be contradictory as regards the general *diagnostic frame*,¹⁴ showing a willingness to accept international legality and to halt the attacks against civilians if a path was opened for peace, sovereignty and Sharia law in Chechnya.¹⁵

If president of Russia Putin makes an official statement that he pledges to strictly comply with the international law in the solution of the Russian-Chechen armed conflict, we will stop all subversive activities and acts of sabotage against unarmed civilians on the territory of Russia (there are no peaceful civilians in Russia), except for special military operations against the military and secret services in the places where they are deployed.

As part of the second cornerstone of this frame – the enforcement of a specific vision of Islamic laws – the guerrillas frequently used terms associated with jihadist rhetoric (Swirszcz 2009) and in Arabic to order to penetrate the identity dynamics of the global Muslim community (Knysh 2012). Thus, the Chechen combatants regard themselves as Mujahideen or shaheed (martyrs), while comparing the post-Soviet wars with the Islamist conflicts in India, China or, retrospectively, Kosovo. In this connection, what was claimed was the compatibility, at least in practice, between national liberation movements and the jihad, since

in the case of the North Caucasus the Chechen people 'are conducting classical (according to European definition) anti-colonial national liberation fight, while relying on the Islamic experiences and Islamic traditions that they have. And thanks to the jihad, the nation mobilized its national will to resist'. As can be gleaned from this last quote, the defence of true Islam was subtly presented as the main difference between the way in which nationalism and jihadism saw the conflict. Similarly, the jihad, understood in both its violent and proselytising dimensions, was defended by the KC as an Islamic duty – that should be funded through charity (*zakat*), one of the five pillars of Islam – or as a way of correcting Western deviations, to wit, 'a rescue operation, for the main mission of Jihad is elimination of unbelief and spreading the firm foundation for moral norms'.

For the most part, the guerrillas found fault with the official Islam championed by clerical organisations linked to the Chechen or Russian authorities. In this regard, the institutional muftis were seen as an extension of state power and the propagators of an erroneous faith whose aim was to pervert and divide the truly faithful of Allah. Thus, it was understood that, vs. governments like those of Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran – the accomplices of Russia in the battle against Islamic dissidence – the only legitimate ones were those of Afghanistan and Chechnya, which shared similar criteria as to how Islam must be understood in order to cast off the Russian yoke; namely, in direct confrontation with the traditionalist (Sufi) and 'pro-Russian' nationbuilding projects.

In a nutshell, for the Muslims of the Caucasus the only feasible and realistic way to achieve emancipation, since the conflict with Russia could not be resolved through consensus, but only through confrontation given the natural and historical depravity of its people, was to take their destiny in their own hands, this time to compensate for the shortcomings of the nationalist project, from a concrete religious perspective close to Salafism and contrary to reformism and Sufism.

4.4. Motivational Framing

In the study period, a frame that encouraged audiences to adopt a militant stance in favour of enlistment and military action was not clearly detected, though, not surprisingly, previously defined elements of the diagnostic and prognostic framing could have contributed to this. The reasons behind this absence can only be accounted for hypothetically, yet coincide with the perspective adopted in the theoretical framework: the primary aim of the English language version of the website was not recruitment, but the construction of meaning (or the quest for financial support).

Nonetheless, a number of common discourses that contemplated the need for armed struggle as part and parcel of legitimate defence (Walzer 2006) in the light of the crimes perpetrated by Russia and its allies against the Muslims of the Caucasus can indeed be distinguished. The logic of argument, a classic

of modern war frames, has been adequately expressed by Rediehs (2002, p. 71): 'But since we are good, even if our actions may sometimes look as horrific as those of the enemy, they are, in fact, justified'. By the same token, after the Dubrovka Theatre incident that led to numerous civilian casualties, a member of the suicide battalion Riyadh as-Salihin, justified the operation on the basis of several legitimate ultimate objectives, as well as blaming the Kremlin for its mismanagement of the situation:

The goal of the operation was to stop the war, to stop the genocide of the Chechen people, and if it doesn't work out then show the entire world that Russian leadership can kill their own fellow citizens in the most brutal way right in the center of Moscow.

As part of the same discourse, and in the face of different attacks like the above-mentioned Dubrovka Theatre hostage crisis and the storming of School No. 1 at Beslan, the suicide attackers' own violence was vindicated as a counterweight to another more serious kind: Russian violence against the Muslims of the Caucasus:

However sad it may sound, but only the events of October 23-26, the taking of hundreds of hostages by Chechen suicide attackers, is giving the Russian society a slightest idea of the horror that Chechens have been experiencing for the past few years from terrorists in uniforms. [...] It was horrible to watch those attackers in the theater, but it was even more horrible to watch how even in peaceful Azerbaijan a total war catches up with Chechen refugees. [...] There are a lot more hostages in the Chechen 'theater' of horror and absurd than the audience of its Moscow miniaturized copy.

5. Conclusions

Along with the rich academic debate as regards the methods and narratives with which jihadist propaganda tried to radicalise and recruit militants, it could be interesting to analyse those discourses in an attempt to construct a new common sense on the basis of imaginaries relating to political conflicts. It is from this standpoint that this study has been conducted on the discourses with which the Chechen jihadist guerrillas attempted to construct an image of the ethnic Russian that eclipsed the secular colonial vision to become steeped in religiosity.

After performing this analysis, it can be understood that the jihadist guerrillas, in the context of warring factions vying for hegemony in Chechnya, devoted more resources to promoting a religious interpretation of the conflict and to demonising ethnic Russians, than to confronting directly the nationalist government of the CRI – which for strategic reasons and others pertaining to the balance of power they did not yet dare to confront with the same ease than as of 2007. This imagined ethnic Russian was, moreover, portrayed as an abettor of the military operations that the USA and Israel were conducting in other countries, despite the fact that the Kremlin did not support the Iraq War. In this connection, the KC used the criticism of the official Islam of Chechnya and the

taghut foreign governments to contest the Sufi traditionalists who demanded another Islamic model for Chechnya. This connection between international and local events confirms the insights offered by Campana and Ducol (2015) into the 'glocal strategy' of jihadism in the North Caucasus.

The main mechanisms used by the KC to characterise the ethnic Russian as an enemy of Islam, as a way of countering the narratives of the other factions, involved framing 'Russian violence' in a historical aggression that dated back to the Tsarist period, as well as accusing Russian citizens and their accomplices (national traitors) of possessing an inherent (biological) wickedness. A discourse that was sometimes qualified or could even be contradictory, depending on the course of events and the pressure brought to bear by Maskhadov.

In conclusion, the main contribution of this study has been to define the frame in which the jihadist guerrillas could present the idea that 'all western authorities, especially Russian ones, are oppressors. Mujahideen worldwide, but particularly the ones in Chechnya, need to continue their fight for justice' (Knowles 2008, p. 374), since this was essential for taking a firm stance against the other factions. However, major narratives with which to specifically construct a discourse inspiring militants to take up arms, beyond the mere presentation of the problem and an apology for the insurgency's own violence, were conspicuous by their absence.

Notes

1. In Russia, the term *russkie* is used to refer to the country's majority ethnic group of Eastern Slavic extraction. To refer to Russian citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, the term used is *rossiyane*.
2. It's important to stress that despite the generic use of the term 'Islam', it acknowledges a plurality of forms, trends, jurisprudence and communities embraced by the religion, and that the insurgency in the North Caucasus did not try to conceptualize the ethnic Russian as an enemy of all Muslims, but only as a given interpretation that for them was the 'true one'.
3. As held further on, to belittle other forms of Islamic interpretation, such as Sufism, the jihadist guerrillas branded them as allies of Russia (the enemy of Islam), rather than attempting to gain legitimacy through theological and doctrinal debate.
4. In this regard, it should be taken into account that this is a study on external, rather than internal, propaganda. In view of the target audience, the aim was not to build a discourse geared to internal mobilization, not even to enlist new recruits, but to transmit a specific imaginary to the diaspora and the Western Muslim community, thus allowing them to share a new common sense. As Campana and Ducol (2015) explain, '[Chechen Islamist's websites] share the same objectives: increasing the Emirate's legitimacy as part of a local competition for power, enhancing a sense of local community based on religion, justifying the use of violence, and mobilizing supporters' (p. 15). The first two are particularly compatible with the thesis defended in this article.
5. This does not mean to say that all these identities were mutually exclusive, since in secular nationalists and 'pro-Russian' circles there were also those who, furthermore, saw themselves as pious Sufi Muslims.

6. Hereinafter, CRI.
7. This process, called 'Chechenization', led to the Constitution of 2003 – which sparked a wave of terrorist attacks carried out both by the militias of the CRI and by the jihadist insurgencies – and to the successive governments of the Kadyrov clan. It is especially important to bear in mind that, in the multi-faceted dispute between the different factions, a sector of Chechen society began to occupy spaces of power in a parallel administration (called the 'Republic of Chechnya'), which ended up being officially recognized as the only legitimate state, marginalizing the CRI in exile and the Caucasus Emirate on the virtual space. These 'pro-Russians', subject to Chechenization, were also branded as 'national traitors' by the KC.
8. The exception was perhaps Dagestan, where Salafism had a longer tradition. In point of fact, it was from there – it is held – that this doctrine was introduced into Chechnya and into other neighboring republics (Kirsiev and Ware 2002; McGregor 2012; Roshchin 2012). To go deeper into this issue, see (Yemelianova 2002, Ibragimov and Matsuzato 2014).
9. Not all the Islamic factions were Salafi or imported from abroad. Traditional Sufism, a majority current in the region, also experienced a timid revival at the time.
10. Besides taking advantage of the situation, both factions played an important role in provoking that chaos. To give only a couple of examples, in July 1998 a Salafi paramilitary group whose members acted as a self-styled Islamic police force harassed the local (Sufi) population in order to force them to adopt the – alleged – rules of conduct established in the Islamic holy books. The security forces of the CRI reacted by repressing the Salafis and provoking a pitched battle in which at least 50 people died (Izmailov 2006, June 22). Moreover, despite the fact that the Khasav'yurt Accord, which had brought the First Russian-Chechen War to an end, established a series of financial obligations to be fulfilled by Russia, Moscow gave no signs of being willing to honor its commitments (Said 2007, Shedd 2008).
11. It should be noted that during Maskhadov's government, Islam was also rhetorically and legislatively exploited in an attempt to satisfy the demands of the Islamic factions (Henkin 2006).
12. The KC was founded by Movladi Udugov, minister of information during the presidential tenure of Dudayev (Smith 2005) and attached to the CRI during part of Maskhadov's term of office. The jihadist stance of the KC was a progressive phenomenon which gathered steam at the same pace as the gradual ideological evolution of its founder and the Islamization of Chechen society (Wilhelmsen 2005). As of 2007, when the Caucasus Emirate was proclaimed, it began to flaunt its jihadist stance openly (Harding 2012).
13. These were not the only disagreements that the Jihadist guerrillas had with Maskhadov during the war. As a matter of fact, on most occasions the CRI condemned the deaths of Russian civilians caused by the Islamist factions, as well as publically offering, at certain times, a more conciliatory tone than that of its rivals, even declaring its intention to begin peace talks, an idea that was ignored both by Russia and sometimes by the Jihadist insurgency (Rivas Otero and Tarín Sanz 2017). As will be seen further on, in specific situations, both the guerrillas and the KC seconded Maskhadov's calls for peace.
14. The use of contradictory and volatile frames is very commonplace in jihadist propaganda, as Holbrook (2016) has demonstrated in his study of Al-Qaeda.
15. This discourse was yet again repeated later on, when Doku Umarov, the founder and first emir of the Caucasus Emirate, signed a civilian truce during

the mobilizations against Vladimir Putin in 2011–2012. Likewise, his successor, Aliaskhab Kebekov, showed a preference for military objectives vs. civilian ones. Therefore, it can be said that the discourse of the KC was dynamic and coherent with the different political and military decisions made by the jihadist leaders. The above words, attributed to Shamil Basayev, were pronounced in January 2004, a critical moment at which it seemed that the proposals for peace talks repeatedly put forward by Aslan Maskhadov were more likely to fall on deaf ears in the Kremlin (Fuller 2005).

Notes on Contributor

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