

# Fear and silence in Chechnya

**T**he bombing deafens the civilian population that hides wherever it can. It is the first wave of fear.

When the projectiles finally cease, the next wave arrives. It is the din of tanks breaking the liberating silence that followed the bombing. They are tanks with false license plates or simply without any sort of plates at all. Men in balaclavas drag other men from their homes. They say that they are looking for terrorists.

All the men are rounded up and taken outside the town. In abandoned warehouses, FSB agents, the modern version of the KGB, have set up detention areas that they call 'filtration points'. The process of filtration consists of torture, used to extract information.

Meanwhile, back in the town, the troops have installed themselves in the houses devoid of the men folk. Unlike the men, the cries of the women cannot be heard. If it were to become known that they had been with the soldiers, even without their consent, there is a good chance they would be cast out. That is why they stay silent, out of fear. Fear dampens and muffles everything. It did so 10 years ago and it continues to do so today in Chechnya.

This is the tale that Usam Baysaev, member of the Russian NGO Memorial, has to tell. Memorial decided to abandon Chechnya in the summer after the murders of the human rights campaigners Natalya Estemirova and Zarema Sadulayeva and her husband was seen as the last straw. The only, small, compensation was the 2009 Sakharov prize awarded by the European Parliament in recognition of the organisation's humanitarian work.

The Catalan NGO, Lliga dels Drets dels Pobles, through its campaign, *Txetxènia, trenquem el silenci*

(Chechnya, let's break the silence), invited Baysaev to Barcelona to remind us of those 10 years of barbarity. Baysaev says that the situation today is even worse. He tells of the "Chechnyisation" and of the dictatorship of Ramzan Kadyrov, the puppet governor installed by Russian prime minister and former president, Vladimir Putin. There is no longer any need for the troops or the FSB in Chechnya. The macabre division of the community out of fear of 'filtration' has been achieved.

Baysaev is not the only one who came to tell us about the situation in Chechnya and in Russia. By the side of the tanned Baysaev, sat Andrei Nekrasov, who showed his documentary, *Disbelief*. The film tells how, in September 1999, coinciding with Putin's appointment as prime minister, different explosions in a number of buildings in Russia caused more than 300 deaths and numerous injuries. Immediately, these bombings were attributed to Chechen terrorists and a second war against the Caucasus republic was declared.



the remains of Komsomolskoye village, levelled in 2000 /EP

However, the whole series of events stinks to high heaven and one night the Ryazan police is alerted to the presence of unknown people up to something in the basement of a block of flats. The police officers sent to investigate emerge white as sheets. They call for the evacuation of the entire block and the surrounding area. Descriptions of the suspects are sent out. There are arrests. However, everything is covered up. Those arrested turn out to be FSB agents. Two days later, the FSB announces that the sacks found under the building contained nothing more than sugar and that the agents had simply been on manoeuvres. Nekrasov documents all of this in his film. Fear, albeit of a different kind, is present here, too. The fear is that those who can see how Russia has been converted into a police state are so few.

Why should Putin turn once more against Chechnya? No one knows. According to Baysaev, in the following April and then again in the summer, a hefty contingent of troops was sent to the area, something which did not bode well. Had the attacks on the blocks of flats been the fuse for an explosive situation that had been prepared beforehand? It is possible. Putin needed to run a good electoral campaign if he were to emerge victorious in the presidential elections of 2000. Putin did indeed go on to win against the backdrop of many, many deaths. None of these people will return to their families, just as there will be no return for Anna Politkovskaya, Stanislav Markelov, Anastasia Baburova or Natalya Estemirova. The only thing we can do is document how these things happened and continue to happen. The only thing we can do is to speak out. The only thing we can do is to break the silence.



**"Never again will the American taxpayer be held hostage by banks that are too big to fail"**

Barack Obama, US President

To be honest, Mr. President, you should have said "At least not until the next bubble bursts."