

## Chechnya and Kosovo: reflections in a distorting mirror

This is not a text about who was wrong and who was right; neither is it a text which aims to establish the true figures of those killed and displaced by Russian or NATO bombs. It is a tale of two conflicts that share some remarkable similarities and which are to some extent archetypal for our globalised post-Cold War world. It is, above all, an essay about two conflicts which are, *nolens volens*, tied like twins, because they became the focal point of three fundamental, at times competing, principles of how to organise the world. These are: the claims, rights and capacities of the nation state; the claims, rights and capacities of identity groups; and the claims, rights and capacities of international regimes. It is in the discourse and debates about these organisational principles that the outlines of a European (global?) security landscape must be found or will be lost.

### Prologue

*1230 hours, 24 March 1999: NATO airfields in Italy and the United Kingdom*

Eight American B-52 bombers, each carrying twenty cruise missiles in its bomb bay, leave their UK base in Fairford and head towards Serbia. From NATO airfields Aviano and Istrano in Italy, allied aircraft leave at short intervals. The British frigate *HMS Splendid* fires a salvo of cruise missiles. These events are broadcast in real time by satellite links all over the globe. These are the pictures that the public has been told to expect for weeks. It is the beginning of NATO's Operation Allied Force, the long-announced answer of the international community to ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. From 24 March until 3 June, the images of aircraft taking off from airfields in the UK and Italy, and returning home after the completion of their missions become a regular part of TV news programmes. They will gradually replace the images

of Kosovar refugees trying to escape the Serbian assaults. Now the former refugees are shown mainly as a cheerful crowd, applauding NATO's decisive actions. These bombs will pave the way for a safe return to their homeland.

*Meanwhile, over the Atlantic . . .*

The Russian Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov is on his way to Washington, DC. His mission is to obtain a much-needed financial infusion for the crumbling Russian economy. Russia is hoping for new credits from the International Monetary Fund: its external debts need to be restructured and Russian steel exporters need to increase their exports to the highly protected American market. The Russian space industry needs American satellites to be launched from its space centre in Baikonur. However, in a dramatic gesture, upon learning of NATO's attack on Serbia, Prime Minister Primakov orders his plane to return to Moscow. He does not wish to be on the Potomac at a time when American cruise missiles are hitting targets in Serbia, so he tells the reporters waiting at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport on his arrival. Although this seems to be an expensive decision (according to the liberal daily *Kommersant*, it cost the Russian economy up to US\$15 billion<sup>1</sup>), it is certainly a popular one: NATO's attack on Serbia has led to an unprecedented outburst of public emotion in Russia.

In Moscow and some other big cities, there are spontaneous anti-American demonstrations. The façade of the American Embassy suffers slight damage; a pub in Moscow, which is unfortunately named *U Djadi Sema* (Uncle Sam's), is less lucky and is partly demolished. The political entertainer Vladimir Zhirinovski begins to enlist volunteers for the fight against NATO. NATO's Moscow office is shut down and its director expelled. START II and START III are declared virtually dead.

The Russian public's emotions are running high these days, as if the NATO bombs are actually hitting Russia. After a few days, the public's mood cools down somewhat. But a deep conviction of the public and the *classe politique* remains: NATO's action in Kosovo is ultimately threatening the very idea of state sovereignty.

One night of NATO bombing has achieved what ten years of nation building had not: a remarkable consensus between the public and the *classe politique* has emerged. Leaders and public have become close as never before, united in the vociferous condemnation of NATO's operation. They agree that NATO (for the Russians, basically an instrument of US hegemonic ambitions) has finally shown its arrogance and unchecked power aspirations. The cruise missiles of the Alliance are not only hitting targets in Serbia: they are destroying the pillars of a multipolar world. These missiles target the very essence of the United Nations, the peaceful concert of equal nations. They amount to an assault on the idea of state sovereignty. Ultimately, they are hitting Russia.

*August 1999: the Caucasus Mountains, border between Chechnya and Dagestan*

Two long columns of bearded fighters cross the border between Chechnya and Dagestan. They are on their way to carry the Islamic anti-Russian rebellion from Chechnya into Dagestan. They are lightly armed, mainly with AK-47s, some machine guns, a couple of mortars and a few RPG-7s – Russian shoulder-held anti-tank grenade launchers. Shamil Basaev and Emir Khattab, two of Chechnya's most famous warlords, veterans of the first Chechen war, lead the two columns.

For Russia, the first Chechen war in 1994–96 was meant to be a short and victorious one, which would boost the badly damaged reputation of President Yeltsin. Instead, it had turned into a bloody disaster, leaving more than 10,000 Russian soldiers and over 50,000 civilians dead. The Chechens, surprisingly enough, had won on the battlefield, but had made little political progress since then. In the 1996 'peace agreement' of Khasavyurt, which was actually a ceasefire, the opposing sides agreed to postpone the murky question of Chechnya's status until 2000. During the following years, neither side showed any inclination for compromise. In August 1999, Basaev and Khattab decided to take the struggle for Chechnya's independence into Dagestan. They hoped to trigger an uprising of the Dagestani population against the Russians, thus probably deciding the question of Chechnya's status. In their view, the final stage in the war for the liberation of the Islamic population of the North Caucasus from the Russian yoke had just begun.

*Three years later . . .*

The Russian army is still fighting a bloody and costly war against the Chechen rebels. More than 100,000 Russian troops are engaged against the Chechen's small forces. After driving the units of Khattab and Basaev out of Dagestan, the Russian army launched a full-scale war against the Chechen forces in Chechnya. The capital, Grozny, has been completely destroyed; the rebels have been driven into the mountains, where they continue to engage the Russians in a guerrilla war that neither side can win. Almost 300,000 Chechens have become refugees and are internally displaced. For Moscow, this war is a 'policing operation' on a huge scale. Its objective is to protect Russia's state sovereignty and territorial integrity from criminal and terrorist assaults.

The Europeans accuse the Russians of gross human rights' violations in Chechnya. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has suspended Russia's voting rights. Russia's political elite, however, refuses to discuss what it sees as an internal affair. Any reference by Western politicians to international norms and regulations are dismissed as hypocrisy.

After all, it was NATO that bombed Serbia in clear violation of international norms and regulations – and now these same international norms are invoked to prevent Russia from defending itself against a terrorist assault on its territorial integrity.

In the Balkans, Kosovo has *de facto* become a protectorate, governed by the EU and protected by KFOR.<sup>2</sup> The official currency of Kosovo is the Euro, and the UN is struggling hard to establish a working administration. KFOR is struggling hard to protect its monopoly of violence, but the KLA, far from being disarmed, continues to exercise considerable influence. Most of the Kosovar refugees have returned home, and most of the Serbian population have become refugees. They are not especially welcome in Serbia, which has to rebuild almost its entire infrastructure. Slobodan Milosevic has been defeated in the election and displaced through popular protests, but his regime and repressive machine have stayed largely intact, and his popularly elected successor Vojislav Kostunica does not seem to be too accommodating to the West's policy on Kosovo.

The high-intensity military operations in Kosovo and Chechnya are over, and the dust has settled. But there a war of interpretation is still going on. At stake is the 'correct' interpretation of what happened in Kosovo and Chechnya. Did NATO bombs protect and promote human rights, or did they violate international norms and regulations, and the rights of a sovereign state? Do Russian bombs defend Russian territorial integrity and sovereignty, or do they violate human rights? What about the collective rights of the Chechens and the Kosovars? What will become of Kosovo when KFOR leaves? What will become of Chechnya when Russia wins?

NATO's interpretation of the events in Kosovo has clearly won the day in Europe. The notion of 'humanitarian intervention' has given a remarkably high degree of legitimacy to the Alliance's Kosovo policy during the war and in its aftermath. European politicians and the public seem to agree that there are situations where protecting human rights is more important than respecting a state's sovereignty, and that in such cases the use of force even without a UN resolution is justified.

On the other hand, the 'humanitarian intervention' interpretation has failed in Russia. Here, the dominant interpretation is that NATO's action will undermine the principles of state sovereignty and weaken international regulations. This latter interpretation in turn has helped to legitimise the Russian war in Chechnya – a war that Russia fights in order ultimately to protect her sovereignty and territorial integrity. In Russia, the political elite and the public seem to think that the state's sovereignty must be defended by all means, even if the price is an occasional violation of human rights.

The creation of a dominant interpretation has always been an important part of politics. In the cases of Kosovo and Chechnya, interpretation *is* politics. Chechnya and Kosovo are so closely tied together that any interpretation of one case ultimately affects the other. Both NATO and Russia went

to war for the sake of principles, and both made their points with bombs. Indeed, both went to war for principles that seem to be mutually exclusive.

At the core of each of these wars of interpretation is the crucial question of how to reconcile the competing claims of the sovereign states and identity groups concerned. Neither Russia nor NATO has offered a viable answer. But they better had, because 'Kosovo' can happen elsewhere, in Kashmir, in the Philippines, in East Timor, in Sri Lanka, in Punjab – and in many places in the former Soviet Union, like Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, Tatarstan or Chechnya, to name only the notoriously 'hot' spots.

This chapter proceeds by offering an anatomical comparison of the conflicts in Chechnya and Kosovo, emphasising the remarkable similarity between the two. I then move on to the responses of Russia and NATO to the respective Chechen and Kosovo problems, discussing which rationales and motives can, in the absence of any convincing Realist interests, best explain NATO's and Russia's decision to go to war. In the final section, I show how Chechnya and Kosovo are linked, both by *Realpolitik* and, perhaps more directly, by each being the focal point of an on-going war of interpretation. The outcome of each of these wars of interpretation may influence the European security landscape more than the 'hot war' in Kosovo ever could.

### **Chechnya and Kosovo: the similarities**

Both the Chechen and the Kosovo conflict are essentially a by-product of the breakdown of the Soviet and Yugoslav ethno-federations. The Soviet Union and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) were multi-level federations, consisting of ethno-territorially defined units with different status. On the first level were fifteen Soviet republics and six republics of the SFRY. They had all the institutional prerequisites of statehood, that is, political institutions, political symbols, constitutions and borders. Within those units, there were units of the second level, the autonomous republics, which also were ethno-territorially defined. While they enjoyed lesser privileges than the first-level units, they nevertheless possessed similar institutional prerequisites for statehood. Both Chechnya within Russia and Kosovo within Serbia were autonomous republics within first-level subjects of the federation.

After the implosion of the Soviet Union and the SFRY, the first-order subjects of the federations became independent. Thus, the fifteen Soviet republics and five republics of the Yugoslav federation became sovereign nation states, recognised by the international community. Second-level territorial units, however, were denied independence, even in cases where they actively sought it. The international community reacted pragmatically to the problem of how to deal with crumbling empires: all first-level republics were, according to the principle of the self-determination of nations, recognised as sovereign states. The second-level units, i.e. the former autonomous

republics, on the other hand, were not. Here, the principle of the inviolability of borders was invoked.

After the dissolution of the federations, the borders of these second-level units became the fault line for conflict: most hot spots in the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia have emerged over the question of the status of these second-level units. Chechnya, Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia were all ethnically defined territorial units within the Soviet or Yugoslav republics. All of them turned violent, when they started seeking greater autonomy or even independence. Thus, the legacy of the socialist ethno-federalism proved to be especially prone to conflict. When the empire broke down, the Chechens reacted by declaring their independence, thus unilaterally seceding from the Russian Federation. After two years of an incompetent and inconsistent Russian policy toward the breakaway republic this move led to the first Chechen war.<sup>3</sup>

The situation was slightly different in the former Yugoslavia. Milosevic used an aggressive Serb nationalism to build up and stabilise his power within Serbia. Already, in 1989, he had accused the Kosovars of separatism and anti-Serb politics, and removed Kosovo's autonomous status. The social system he installed proved to be the perfect breeding ground for inter-group violence: Kosovars were under-represented in political and economic key positions, and denied access to educational and business opportunities, while the use of Kosovar cultural symbols was restricted in public spaces. The amount of inter-group violence was much higher in Kosovo than it was in Chechnya. The Kosovars and the Serbs have been engaged in a low-intensity internal conflict ever since 1989. By March 1998, the conflict had escalated into an open guerrilla war between the Serbian police and army units and the KLA. By the autumn of 1998, ethnic cleansing on a massive scale was going on, and NATO began to threaten Milosevic with air strikes.

In the cases of Chechnya and Kosovo, there were additional permissive conditions that made conflict highly probable.<sup>4</sup> The Chechens and the Kosovars had, prior to the actual outbreak of violence, a highly developed sense of otherness in relation to the dominant group of each state, that is, respectively, the Russians and the Serbs. Russians–Chechens and Serbs–Kosovars are separated by language and religion. Chechens–Russians and Kosovars–Serbs have, furthermore, complex histories of grievance – the Chechens remember well the Tsarist wars and Stalin's deportation of the entire Chechen nation to Kazakhstan; and the Kosovars have not forgotten the continuous politics of Serbisation of their homeland by administrative measures or violence, dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Chechnya and Kosovo can thus be labelled post-socialist conflicts. These conflicts were shaped by the institutional legacy of the socialist ethno-federations, and triggered by the collapse of the Yugoslav federation and the Soviet Union. However, these conflicts share another set of similarities, one often overlooked. The type of violence that has emerged in Kosovo and

in Chechnya resembles in many ways the violent conflicts in Africa or Latin America of the last decade. They belong to a type of violence that Mary Kaldor has labelled 'new wars', that is a type of organised violence that blurs the distinction between war (defined as violence between states or organised political groups), organised crime and the large-scale violation of human rights.<sup>5</sup> Such wars involve not only state actors and state armies, but myriad other actors, like paramilitaries, the warlords, militias, international aid or human rights organisations, mass media and international organisations. Therefore, such wars are by definition transnational, since most, if not all, of these actors are embedded in transnational networks.

'New wars' may have been common in Africa; but Chechnya and Kosovo became the first new wars that were fought and broadcast in Europe. Chechnya and Kosovo are thus not only examples of post-socialist conflicts: they may be the first manifestation of a new type of violence, one that is on the rise globally and will not stop at the fuzzy borders of Europe, and which calls for new responses.

Such new wars share at least four common features:

- they are conflicts between identity groups and the state;
- they take place in an environment where the state in question is at best 'weak' or at worst all but absent;
- they often lead to the emergence of a 'market of violence';<sup>6</sup> and
- the conflicts, and the actors, are embedded in transnational networks of images, resources and politics.

*Violence between the state and organised identity groups* has become a worldwide phenomenon, and the number of violent conflicts of this type has been growing since 1950.<sup>7</sup> There are three broad sets of reasons for that growth. The first has to do with the steadily increasing acceptance of, and concern for, collective rights, which is part of the (Western) cultural evolution since the 1960s. The second set has to do with cultural globalisation, which threatens to replace indigenous cultures with the globally proliferating *McCulture*. The greater the loss of specificity to a given culture, the more people tend to stress or reinvent the remaining distinctiveness, building cultural communes of resistance. As the information technology of today makes it cheap and easy to disseminate cultural markers, group-building processes are becoming faster and cheaper than ever. The third set relates to the processes of de-colonisation after World War II and the collapse of empires after 1989, which have triggered many conflicts of this type, among them the conflicts in Chechnya and Kosovo.

Like most originally internal conflicts, both the Chechnya and Kosovo conflicts have their roots in an environment that is characterised above all by dramatic *state weakness*. I define state weakness here as little or no capacity to provide collective goods, and little or no coercive power. State weakness may have many sources, and the on-going discussion of the diminishing role and capabilities of the nation state in our current globalised

era points at one. However, in the cases of the Russian Federation and Serbia, there is no need to look at the process of globalisation in order to explain their dramatic state weakness. Both the Russian Federation and Serbia are the successor states of imploded socialist federations, and each is trying to establish its statehood on the ruins of an empire. This task at times clearly overloads these new states. The result is state weakness, and its most dangerous symptom is loss of the monopoly of violence. After the collapse of the socialist federations, the Balkans and the post-Soviet space saw a proliferation of weapons of all kinds, from small firearms to tanks, aircraft and artillery. Most of the hardware came from the stockpiles of the Red Army and the Yugoslav Army. What was needed in addition was provided by international arms dealers, to whom the numerous new and quite permeable international borders posed no serious hindrance.

State weakness also means that the state is no longer able to penetrate the territory with its institutions, and part of the state's territory becomes *de facto* governed by alternative institutions, such as clans, criminal networks, rebel governments or local potentates. In such 'lost territories', social security is provided by family ties, education by grandparents and protection by private 'firms'. In short, state weakness fosters the creation of parallel or alternative institutions, which tend to be more private and more criminal than the crumbling state institutions. In the mid-1990s, both Kosovo and Chechnya had become, from the perspective of the central state, such 'lost territories'. In Chechnya, between 1994 and 1999, the Russian state was all but absent and the Chechens have, though with no success, tried to establish their alternative state structures. In Kosovo, the Serbian state maintained its presence, though only by means of violence and at a considerable cost. The Kosovars reacted by establishing parallel 'shadow' institutions, and by 1998 they had had their shadow state fully in place.

In both cases, low-intensity conflicts were well under way since the early 1990s, and restricted but organised violence became part of daily life. Prolonged violence paves the way for the emergence of *markets of violence*. By 'market of violence' I mean a situation where violence is both politically and economically profitable for a handful of successful entrepreneurs of violence. The organisation of violence, however, is expensive, and sustained violence needs continual investment: warlords have to buy weapons for their soldiers, soldiers need vehicles and vehicles need fuel. Therefore, entrepreneurs of violence engage in a sort of economy of war which characteristically blurs the border between legal economic activities, organised crime and warfare. This economy tends to be integrated in transnational networks of trade and investment. Entrepreneurs of violence engage in drug or weapon trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, or in the black economy. Profits are reinvested or kept in offshore banks. More often than not, sustained markets of violence consequently become trading routes for goods with a very high value per weight, such as drugs, gold, diamonds or weapons. In addition, markets of



violence often serve as a hub for duty-free importation–exportation. Other sources of revenues include profits from kidnapping or, where it is available, the squandering of humanitarian aid.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, when local production and logistics are destroyed, the black economy booms, controlled by those who have the monopoly of violence.

Both Chechnya and Kosovo, together with places like Afghanistan, Kashmir, Somalia, the Philippines and numerous others, qualified at a certain stage as markets of violence.<sup>9</sup> The ‘core’ of these conflicts is still political; but for the entrepreneurs of violence there is an important economic rationale for prolonging the conflict. This rationale has to be addressed analytically and practically before any sustainable end to violence can be negotiated between, or forced upon, the actors involved. Thus, any political solution to such conflicts must be preceded by a strategy of raising the costs for violence, which can only be achieved by closing the borders for supply, denying the entrepreneurs of violence access to financial markets and/or establishing a monopoly of violence by external powers. All of these measures, however, are usually costly, dangerous, time-consuming and very difficult to achieve: drying up markets of violence is a difficult task. Nation states are often incapable of handling it, and external intervention is often not a good instrument with which to tackle it either.

New wars tend to be geographically restricted, but they are *embedded in transnational networks* which link these local wars with the globalising world. The entrepreneurs of violence depend on the transnational ties of trade and investment; on the other hand, international organisations such as the UN, the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe are monitoring the conflicts, pointing at violations of international norms and regulations, and occasionally making attempts at conflict regulation. Once the violence has reached a certain level, all sorts of ‘internationals’ enter the scene. International non-governmental organisations provide help, gather information or sponsor developments they think desirable. They act locally, but they use the resources of their international sponsors. Newsmakers and image distributors bring the war, as soon as it becomes an ‘event’, to the attention of audiences all over the world. And then journalists, international relief organisations, human rights activists, press officers and supporters of identity groups in conflict all flock to the place, ready to provide their selection of facts to an international audience. At times, this selection is so gruesome and compelling that the international community is forced to respond.

### **Chechnya and Kosovo: the responses**

War used to be the ultimate domain of high politics, and high politics used to be ruled on the basis of Realist considerations. According to this body of literature, states go to war if their survival is at stake (or when there

is a dominant perception that this might be the case), or if they think that relative gains *vis-à-vis* other states can be made. However, both Russia's Chechen campaign and NATO's Kosovo campaign are characterised by a distinct lack of Realist interest. Realism, the self-evident traditional interpretative key to international relations, fails to explain these developments: neither NATO nor the Russian Federation went to war because its survival was actually threatened, or because of relative gains to be made. Rather, one of the main objectives of these wars was to satisfy the expectations of domestic audiences, on the one hand, and to 'send the right message' to the 'villains', on the other. Both NATO and Russia wanted to make a point with bombs. Winning these wars not only meant to outgun the enemy – it meant above all 'selling' the conflict to the consumer, i.e. having the monopoly of interpretation.

If this reason seems unconvincing, one can take a brief look at alternative Realist explanations. As for Russia's war in Chechnya, there have been three sets of Realist argument: the oil argument; the domino argument; and the geopolitical argument. None of them seems compelling.

The *oil-argument* sees the main motive for the war over Chechnya in the Chechen oil-wells. The oil argument is usually supported by reference to Chechnya's importance as a transit route for oil from the Caspian to the Russian terminal in Novorossiysk. There are, however, problems with this argument. To begin with, the quantity of Chechen oil is insignificant. It has no strategic importance, and the profits to be made are too small to warrant activating the state's military machine. During the final decade of the Soviet Union, Chechen oil accounted for approximately 2 per cent of the overall Soviet production. Since then, oil production in Chechnya has dramatically decreased. What is more, if the war were really about oil, then it would make no sense for Russian bombs to destroy most of the infrastructure. Finally, Chechnya is not important as a transit route for the Caspian oil, since the main export route will anyway go through Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan.

The *domino argument* suggests that Chechnya is the first domino to fall, causing a chain reaction all over the Caucasus and probably reaching the ethnic republics in Siberia and the Volga regions. The international community and, certainly, states which themselves have fought a war against 'falling dominoes' tend to meet this argument with understanding. However, this line of reasoning fails any empirical test. The first Chechen war, although won by the Chechens, has not produced a growing quest for independence from Russia within the ethnic republics. On the contrary, Chechnya's fragmentation in the inter-war period has strengthened the inclination of ethnic elites in the republics to stay within the Russian Federation, especially so within Chechnya's Islamic neighbour republics Ingushetia and Dagestan.

The *geopolitical argument* combines the oil argument and the domino argument, and places both into the broader context of geopolitical rivalry

between Russia, Turkey, Iran and the US, with the Caucasus as the battlefield.<sup>10</sup> There is no denying that geopolitics plays an important role in the Caucasus, and it certainly does so in the minds of the political elites. However, during the last ten years Russia's politics in the Caucasus has amounted to nothing but a more or less orderly retreat. Russian influence in Georgia and Azerbaijan is continually decreasing; Russia has maintained a significant military presence only in Armenia, with the consent of the Armenians themselves. On the other hand, Iran and Turkey, both potential rivals to Russian regional hegemony, have kept a relatively low profile towards the events in Chechnya. Iran needs Russia as a supplier of weapons and nuclear technology, and also in order to balance the hegemonic aspirations of the US. Thus, Iran's official support for its Islamic brethren in Chechnya is moderate. Turkey, on the other hand, has a deeper understanding of the 'internal affairs' argument because of its own Kurdish problem. It is clearly unwilling to take any political risks for the sake of the Chechens, although public support in Turkey for the Chechen cause is high and prominent Chechen politicians operate from Istanbul.

Realist explanations of Russia's war in Chechnya are, therefore, less than convincing. What about NATO's motives and interests? Here, Realists seem to face even more obstacles. In the Balkans, there are no significant resources that would make a war worthwhile. There is no potential challenger to NATO's hegemony in the region, and Milosevic's Serbia was definitely no threat to NATO member states. There are, however, two Realist arguments worth considering.

According to one argument, the aggressive nationalism of Serbia posed a threat to the stability of the whole region, with possible effects for NATO's southern flank. The Serbian policy of repression and ethnic cleansing of the Kosovars could have spread to Albania and Macedonia. Macedonia has a significant Albanian minority, so that refugees from Kosovo could have changed the ethnic balance there, leading to internal conflict. In another scenario, the Albanians of Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania would have revitalised the idea of a Greater Albania. Either way, the territorial integrity of Macedonia would have been endangered. Were Macedonian statehood put under question, Greek, Turkish and Serb interventions would have become a real possibility, constituting a threat to NATO's southern flank.

The second argument posits that the Serbian policy of repression and ethnic cleansing created refugee flows which would, sooner rather than later, reach EU countries. As is well known, accommodating refugees is expensive and politically sensitive. In order to prevent this from happening, NATO decided to force Serbia to halt its policy of aggression.

Both arguments have some credibility, but share one big flaw: a rational actor chooses the cheapest and safest plan to achieve its objectives. A full-scale air operation against Serbia was neither cheap nor without risk. In order to contain Serbia, the cheapest and safest way would have been to

engage the Extraction Force, to keep the refugees in the neighbouring countries, and to negotiate their return in exchange for political concessions.

To sum up: neither Russia's war in Chechnya nor NATO's war against Serbia can be explained by Realist interpretations and motives alone. Yet both wars have taken place, so how do we explain them? If we follow the official discourse of NATO, the reason for war was the protection of the Kosovars against the criminal assaults of the Serbian state. Moscow's official line cited the defence of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation and the restoration of law and order in the 'lost territory' of the breakaway Chechen Republic as reasons for the 'anti-terrorist operation' in Chechnya.<sup>11</sup> Both Russia and NATO had some good arguments: Milosevic's Serbia was without doubt guilty of gross violations of human rights; and breakaway Chechnya had, especially after the first Chechen war, indeed become a place where crime was rampant.

However, NATO had not gone to war in all cases of human rights' violations in recent history, and Russia had seen too many challenges to its state sovereignty from organised crime and obstinate regional elites without going to war over any of those issues either.<sup>12</sup> The official discourses grasp only some of the reasons for war; these were merely necessary, but certainly not sufficient, conditions.

I argue here that the decision to go to war had been shaped, apart from the stated principles ('protection of the human rights' for NATO, and 'protection of the territorial integrity and sovereign rights' for Russia), by the following reasons:

- 1 the need and opportunity to respond to the expectations of domestic audiences;
- 2 the opportunity to 'send a message' to targeted audiences – whereas the 'decision' to go to war has been eased by –
- 3 a blurred chain of command and by an almost complete lack of democratic control mechanisms in both cases.

I start with the third of my reasons. Russian policy is for structural reasons incoherent: at best it is polyphonic, at worst cacophonous. Russia's institutions are still weak, political elites are engaged in endless power struggles, and there is a strong tendency to use foreign and security policies mainly for their symbolic value on the domestic front.<sup>13</sup> The second Chechen war began as a limited defence operation. The Russian army pushed the units of the Chechen commanders out of Daghestan. This defence operation then gradually developed into a full-scale war against the Chechen guerrillas. There are some credible assertions by former Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin that the military plans for such operations had already been in place in early spring 1999, and that the army had just waited for an opportunity to strike. The opportunity came when the limited defence operation against the Chechen invasion in Daghestan proved to be successful, and hugely popular with the public. However, there had never been a formal decision by the president;

there had been no ultimatum to the Chechens, and there had been no parliamentary debate. President Yeltsin took responsibility for the war only after the war had become a huge public relations success for Prime Minister Putin.

The decision-making process during NATO's war was similarly blurred, and had a very questionable popular legitimacy. Here, decision making and democratic legitimisation got all but lost in a thicket of delegated decisions and pre-emptive legitimisation acts, and in evoking the spirit, but not the letter, of the UN Security Council's resolutions. In the end, the NATO Council took the decision alone. It did so in the spirit of the UNSC Resolutions 1199 and 1203, in the spirit of the declaration of the Contact Group prior to the Rambouillet talks, and in the spirit of the NATO Council's threat from October 1998. However, it had no explicit mandate from the UNSC, since Russia and China would have vetoed it, and there had been no prior debate in the national parliaments of member countries.

A second objective of both wars was to meet public expectations. It is hard to say what comes first, images, public expectations, political action or active image manipulation. At the start there was probably an image, e.g. a picture of a refugee who had barely escaped from ethnic cleansing, with a burning house in the background. This image created public expectations: 'Somebody must do something about it!' Public expectations prompted political action, and, in order to sustain the public mood, creative management of the information flow was generating more images. The image, the expectation, the action and information management formed a self-sustaining process. Once the circle begins to spin, each component reinforces the others.

The images of Kosovar refugees fuelled public indignation. Ethnic cleansing in Europe? Never again!<sup>14</sup> The indignation was rising, and with it the legitimisation and acceptance of war, fought by European nations in Europe against another European state, without a UN mandate. Preparations for war, and the war itself, were accompanied by a media campaign, skilfully orchestrated by NATO spokesman Jamie Shea and his colleagues. Its main actors were the Kosovar refugees, and NATO's clean and smart high-tech weapons. Both images contributed to the legitimisation of war – the refugees were standing evidence that someone had to do something, and a display of weapons certified that NATO could do the job, with high efficiency and minimal collateral damage.<sup>15</sup>

Things were somewhat different in the case of Chechnya: Russia had lost not only the first Chechen war on the battlefield, but the information war itself. Images of a demoralised army, of senseless destruction and the vandalised corpses of Russian soldiers had forced a sharp anti-war turn in the Russian public opinion, finally leading to the cease-fire of Khasavyurt in 1996.

In the first war, the Russian army had made the same mistake as the Serbs during their war against the Kosovars: they had treated journalists as enemies and tried to keep them out. Journalists sneaked into Chechnya and

Kosovo anyway with the help of the locals. Consequently, they reported from the Chechen and the Kosovar side, and media coverage often reflected only Chechen and Kosovar views.

By August 1999, the Russians had learned their lesson: during the second Chechen war, journalists were guests of the Russian army, witnessing its ‘police operation’, while the Chechen victims’ perspective was hardly noticeable in the Russian papers and TV screens. Instead, it was the images of tortured and executed hostages of the Chechen criminal gangs that were widely disseminated and presented to the European politicians.<sup>16</sup>

These manipulated images conveyed the impression of a highly motivated and technically up-to-date Russian army successfully conducting a police operation against the Chechen bandits. These images catered to the principal demand of the Russian population, as was revealed by numerous polls: a quest for *poryadok*, order. It also played into the hands of Vladimir Putin, the previously unknown KGB *apparatchik* chosen by Boris Yeltsin and his entourage to become Russia’s next President. When Putin became Prime Minister in August 1999, only a few Russians knew him, and even fewer liked him. However, skyrocketing approval ratings soon rewarded his decisive and tough stance on Chechnya. On 1 January 2000, he became acting-president, and on 26 March 2000 he easily won the presidential elections in the first round. Without the war in Chechnya – which gave Putin ample opportunity to demonstrate his determination, decisiveness and toughness – there probably would have never been a President Putin.

Images of the second Chechen war easily captured the minds and hearts of the electorate. They proved to be a powerful message, saying Putin = *poryadok*. By the same token, images of NATO aircraft taking off and landing, and images of refugees gradually turning into cheerful crowds, applauding NATO’s war efforts, sent the message to domestic audiences in Europe and the US: ‘NATO is doing something about it, *and* it is fair.’ Ten years after the end of the Cold War and the virtual loss of its principal *raison d’être*, the Alliance had finally found a new mission: the Europeans had found a sort of common identity in a common war, and the ‘West’ had finally showed to the ‘rest’ that it would stand up and fight for its principles.

While domestic audiences in both cases were important recipients, they were not the only ones. Images of war are polysemantic: on the one hand,

<b>Russian bombs in Chechnya</b>	<b>Nato bombs in Serbia</b>
To self: Putin = order	To self: We protect human rights
To other: No breakaway	To other: Do not mess with NATO

**Figure 5** *Polysemantics of war images*

they must target domestic audiences in order to synchronise domestic moods with the political actions taken by the elite; on the other hand, they must deliver a message to the 'other'. Thus, NATO aircraft were delivering a message to Milosevic, and also to potential Milosevics. The message read: 'Those who do not respect the basic principle of human rights face a determined response from NATO.' Operation Allied Force just drove that point home, restoring NATO's 'credibility' after months of empty threats. The same is true of the Russian bombs: they were meant to bomb into submission the Chechen guerrillas and/or to prove Putin's toughness; but they also carried a message to other potential 'breakaway' republics.

The problem, however, is that messages can be unwittingly or deliberately misinterpreted, and read by others than the intended recipients. Thus, NATO's message, originally meant for Milosevic and intended for domestic consumption, was received by and deciphered in Russia. To Russia, it said: 'NATO is willing to violate the principle of sovereignty, without consent of the United Nations.' On the other hand, the message Russia sent to domestic consumers and would-be separatists said to NATO countries: 'Russia is willing to violate human rights on a large scale for the sake of her imperial ambitions.' The result was an on-going war of interpretation, a cooling down of East–West relations and the fallout in 'real' Russian politics.

### Epilogue: reflections in a distorting mirror

The conflicts in Chechnya and Kosovo are in many ways closely linked. There is a remarkable similarity between the two cases. Both are post-socialist and post-imperial conflicts, and both share the characteristics of 'new wars'. The responses of Russia and NATO were also in many ways similar: both have been largely influenced by domestic considerations and by the need and the opportunity to 'send messages'. Another similarity lies in the fact that pure Realist approaches are not well suited to explain these wars.

Chechnya and Kosovo are also linked because these twin conflicts serve as an interface between Russia and the West. It is not that Russia has any Realist interests in Kosovo, or that 'the West' has any similar interest in Chechnya. Nor, for that matter, is it that 'the West' has any significant influence on the events in Chechnya, or Russia any significant influence on the events in Kosovo.<sup>17</sup> However, it is *over* Chechnya and Kosovo that Russia and the West engage in debates: it is here that both test the actual market value of their principles and measure their actual weight in *Realpolitik*. It is primarily over Chechnya–Kosovo that Russia and the West are playing the game of mutual integration/insulation.

Prior to the Kosovo crisis there were numerous attempts at integrating Russia into the West's Balkan policy, for example as a member of the Contact Group for Bosnia, as co-chair of the Dayton Conference, and as a

participant of SFOR and KFOR. These attempts at integrating Russia in the Western policy were, however, a facilitation for East–West relations rather than a significant contribution to European policy on the Balkans. At present Russia has neither the resources for nor any serious interests in being a key player in the Balkans. Russia's primary interest in the region is, above all, in defining its position *vis-à-vis* the West. Before the outbreak of the Kosovo crisis, Russia took a flexible and pragmatic stand on Western policy on the Balkans: it was generally supportive, but in certain symbolic matters ostentatiously kept its distance. For example, it wished, and obtained, some sort of autonomy for the Russian units within SFOR.

The outbreak of the Kosovo crisis changed that situation. The more the West (NATO and EU member states) sought Russian support for its policy towards the Milosevic regime, the more reluctant Russia became. When NATO aircraft demonstratively carried out manoeuvres over the former Yugoslavia in June 1998, the Kremlin no less demonstratively received Milosevic for talks in Moscow. Although Russia supported UNSC Resolution 1199, it tried to slow down the efforts of the Contact Group to implement decisive action on Serbian non-compliance, and made it clear that it would under no circumstances support NATO air strikes.

Russia's reluctance to support Western policy paralysed the UN. As a result NATO emerged as the key player in the Kosovo drama, and signalled that it would act without a UN mandate, if necessary. This, in turn, stiffened Russian resistance to what, in the end, became unilateral NATO policy in the Balkans. When NATO started Operation Allied Force, diplomatic and public reactions in Moscow were extremely harsh, and Russian top politicians gloomily spoke about a new Cold War, or even hinted at the possibility of a third world war.<sup>18</sup> The Kosovo crisis suddenly showed a deep rift between Russia and the West, and it seemed that the policy of mutual integration and accommodation had proved a failure. It had indeed been a pet idea of Russian foreign policy to integrate and thus constrain NATO into international regimes, such as the UN or the OSCE. Until 1997, one of Russia's favourite ideas was to put the OSCE in charge of NATO. Likewise, the West had attempted to integrate and constrain Russia in Western institutions and policies. The Kosovo crisis has demystified these mutual attempts at integration for what they were – benevolent and useful simulations.

NATO air strikes were seen in Russia, and not without good reason, as an arrogant demonstration of power, a violation of international norms and regulations, and ultimately as a threat to Russian national security and to international stability in general. Consequently, paragraph 3 of the new Russian National Security Doctrine, adopted in April 2000, states:

[A] destabilizing impact on the military–political situation is exerted by attempts to weaken the existing mechanism for safeguarding international security (primarily, the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) . . . [and ] by the use of coercive military actions as a means



of 'humanitarian intervention' without the sanction of the UN Security Council, in circumvention of the generally accepted principles and norms of international law.<sup>19</sup>

NATO air strikes ended in June 1999. A month later, the second Chechen war began. When the West expressed disapproval and protest over the gross violation of human rights by the Russian army, this criticism was widely rejected in Russia as hypocrisy.

The high-intensity conflicts in Chechnya and Kosovo are over, but the war of interpretation is still going on, and binds the two cases even closer together. Russia claims that NATO's action was a violation of the international norms, especially of the UN Charter. NATO declares that its actions were justified, because they were aimed at the protection of the human rights of the Kosovars. On the other hand, Russia claims to be defending its territorial integrity and sovereign rights in Chechnya, while the West maintains that Russia is violating the international norms, especially the human rights of the Chechen civilians. The debates on what Kosovo was about, and what its implications really are, are also crucial for an understanding of what Chechnya is about, and vice versa. Kosovo and Chechnya have become synonyms, two signs forced to share a single referent – while that referent is actually contested. Chechnya is the reflection of Kosovo. But this mirror is a distorting mirror.

NATO probably feels no urge to look into the mirror for the time being. It has won the war, and while the UN is working hard to restore a civilian administration in Kosovo, NATO is busy managing its impressive collection of pictures from the war: here a happy refugee, there a clean cockpit video. For Russia, the distorting mirror will not go away any time soon, and she feels dizzy. In order to find a hold, Russia gladly embraced a new president. He has a black belt in Judo, and he is likely to abolish all mirrors.

## Notes

- 1 *Kommersant Daily*, 24 March 1999.
- 2 With Resolution 1244, the UNSC has externalised administration and security of Kosovo. Based on this resolution, UNMIK (United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo) was established. Formally, the UN is responsible for UNMIK, but the EU bears the bulk of the financial and organisational burden of the interim administration.
- 3 Until 1990, Chechnya together with Ingushetia formed the autonomous Chechen–Ingushetian Republic within the Russian Federation. In 1991, the two separated. Ingushetia remained within the Russian Federation, Chechnya declared independence.
- 4 For a useful overview of permissive factors for ethno-political conflict, see Michael E. Brown, 'The Causes of Internal Conflict: An Overview', in Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Cote, Steven E. Miller and Sean M. Lynn-Jones, (eds), *Nationalism and*

- Ethnic Conflict. An International Security Reader* (Cambridge, MA, and London, MIT Press, 1997).
- 5 The term was coined, to the best of my knowledge, by Mary Kaldor in *New and Old Wars. Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1999).
  - 6 As far as I am aware, this concept was developed by Georg Elwert of the Free University of Berlin. See Georg Elwert, 'Gewaltmärkte. Beobachtungen zur Zweckrationalität der Gewalt', in Trutz von Trotha (ed.), *Soziologie der Gewalt, Sonderheft 37 der Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* (Köln, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997). See also François Jean, Jean-Christophe Rufin (eds), *Économie des guerres civiles* (Paris, Hachette, 1996).
  - 7 Ted Robert Gurr and Barbara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1994), p. 11. I prefer the term 'identity group' to the narrower labels 'ethnic groups' or 'minority groups', because not all groups in conflict are minorities, and not all organised groups are bound together by ethnicity. In today's globalising world, cultural communities often transcend the 'natural' borders of territory, language, religion or local customs, but form communities nevertheless, bound together by selected markers of difference. After all, in conflicts identity is what people choose to fight over.
  - 8 Ann Auerbach-Hagendorn, *Ransom. The Untold Story of International Kidnapping* (New York, Henry Holt & Co., 1998); Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p. 103.
  - 9 It is well known (and duly stressed by the Russian media) that kidnapping, extortion, drug and weapon trafficking are booming industries in Chechnya. Less well known is that Kosovo has become an important hub for drug trafficking and that the KLA, also thanks to its military muscle, has become a key player in the Balkan narco-business. This is a serious problem which KFOR needs to deal with. Cf. Sunil Ram, 'NATO in Kosovo: In Bed with a Scorpion', *The Globe and Mail*, 9 August 2000.
  - 10 This argument comes sometimes in the Huntingtonian guise, that is the war in Chechnya is fought between the Orthodox world and Islam.
  - 11 For NATO's official discourse, see e.g. 'NATO & Kosovo: Historical Overview', available: <http://www.nato.int/kosovo/history.htm> (accessed 5 December 2000; see chapter 7, by Andreas Behnke, in this volume). The Russian official discourse is harder to localise, for two reasons: it is still in the making; and Russia, as a rule, speaks with many voices. However, for a good overview, see the homepage of Rosinformtsentr, run by the Russian Federation's Ministry for Press, Television, Radio Broadcasting and Mass Communications, a site exclusively dedicated to the events in and around Chechnya, as seen by the official Russia: <http://www.infocentre.ru> (accessed 5 December 2000). Rosinformtsentr is an attempt at a more effective and centralised information policy, and it clearly shows that Russia has learned a lot from NATO.
  - 12 It is estimated that over 50 per cent of regional laws in Russia contradict federal laws.
  - 13 Christoph Zürcher, 'Krieg und Frieden in Tschetschenien: Ursachen, Symbole, Interessen', *Arbeitspapiere des Osteuropa-Instituts*, no. 2 (1997)
  - 14 This 'Never again' found a special resonance in German ears. The German *Nie wieder*, the ultimate moral imperative central to German politics and society, underwent a semantic dilation: prior to Kosovo, 'Never again' meant 'Never

- again will ethnic cleansing and genocide start in Germany', that is in Europe. Now, impelled by such images, it means also 'Never again will Europe allow ethnic cleansing and genocide'. Already in October 1999 the German Bundestag had decided that it would support an armed NATO operation if Milosevic did not give in to diplomatic pressure and if there was no other way to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Kosovo. With that decision, the Bundestag gave up a central piece of post-war (West) German policy.
- 15 The informational side of NATO's war in Kosovo was impressive indeed. Courtesy of NATO, selected images are available online for further examination (see also chapter 7 of this volume). A collection of NATO videos is available at <http://www.nato.int/kosovo/video.htm> (accessed 5 December 2000). A collection of photographs, maps, aerial views and pre- and post-strike cockpit videos used during the press conference by General Wesley Clark is available at <http://www.nato.int/kosovo/slides/m990916a.htm> (accessed 5 December 2000).
  - 16 The Chechens, having 'lost' the TV presence in Russia, make increasing use of the World Wide Web for distributing their perspective. The website <http://www.kavkaz.org> (accessed 5 December 2000) is the mouthpiece of Movladi Udugov, information minister of the Chechen Republic; and <http://www.qoqaz.co.za> (accessed 5 December 2000) is a fundamentalist website which presents the Chechen war as a *Jihad*. This website hosts a broad selection of especially gruesome and detailed pictures of 'destroyed aggressors', martyred mujahiddin and killed civilians. The Western press, interestingly enough, has started to read and quote Chechen statements from Kavkaz.org as counterpoints to Russian statements.
  - 17 One of the most prominent myths about the Kosovo war, especially in Germany, is that Russia has had some influence on Milosevic, influence which made 'peace without Russia impossible'. Actually, Russia had no influence whatsoever on Milosevic's surprising capitulation to NATO demands; Russia mainly jumped on the Ahtisaari mission as soon as it became clear that Ahtisaari would present the G-7/G-8 peace plan with or without Russia. See also the interview with Marri Ahtisaari, 'Così ho convinto Milosevic a cedere', *La Repubblica*, 25 July 2000.
  - 18 On 9 April 1999 President Yeltsin said in an interview: 'I have told the NATO people, the Americans, the Germans: "Don't push us into military action. Otherwise there would certainly be a European, and perhaps a world war."' See Gwynne Dyer, 'Behind Yeltsin's Threat', *The Moscow Times*, 13 April 1999.
  - 19 Text of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, approved by a presidential decree dated 21 April 2000, published in *Nezavisimaya gazeta* on 22 April 2000. For an English translation, see *David Johnson's Russia List*, no. 4269, 26 April 2000.