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Demos Center, Militsiia mezhdou Rossiei i Chechnei. Veterany konflikta v rossiiskom obshchestve

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- 1 The Demos¹ study on policemen who are veterans of the Chechen war² is the Centre's second in-depth study. The first dealt with the phenomenon of arbitrariness (*"proizvol"*) in the police force. This new study focuses on one of the contributing factors of this arbitrariness, the fact of having gone through the Chechen war³.
- 2 Although the two Chechen conflicts (1994-1996 and 1999 to the present) involved the dispatch of tens of thousands of military and members of "power" ministries to the combat zones, the Demos Centre chose for its study to focus exclusively on policemen and the special forces of the Ministry of the Interior (OMON, Special Purpose Militia Detachment).
- 3 Officially, military operations in Chechnya ended in 2002, at which time a "reconstruction" phase began. Since then, rotating units of policemen and members of the special forces of the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) have continued to be sent for purposes of maintaining order, training Chechen Interior forces and helping them with their various missions, since in reality, confrontations did not end in 2002 but have continued since then.
- 4 When these men return home, they find themselves once again at their former posts in direct contact with the population, unlike members of the armed forces and special Ministry of Defence forces who, as of 2002, returned home with their garrison and integrated their previous missions.
- 5 According to Demos, because there are no adequate systems of professional and psychological rehabilitation, when these policemen return to civilian life, they experience a deprofessionalization and disadaptation often leading to misconduct and violations of the laws they are supposed to enforce.
- 6 In the effort to understand in what ways and to what extent these men were influenced by their experience in Chechnya and to assess how it affected their adaptation to civilian life on their return, the Demos Centre, in 2006, interviewed Interior Ministry veterans, their wives, commanders of police stations, MVD psychologists, and leaders of veterans organizations. The Centre's report is based on a total of 95 interviews.
- 7 The report is divided into five parts; the first deals with how the policemen related to the Chechen conflict, what they thought of the situation and the reasons that led them to go to Chechnya. The second part concerns their rehabilitation and adaptation to civilian life. The third examines the relationship of society to veterans. The fourth is devoted to problems concerning Canadian veterans, and the last examines the situation of veterans in five Russian regions.
- 8 While the large majority of commanders interviewed for the study saw the Chechen experience as positive – in their opinion it bonded the group together, enabled policemen to gain greater confidence in themselves and learn to shoot – the Demos report points out several factors linked to the Chechen experience that had a negative effect on the men's overall situation.
- 9 One of these was the lengthening of the duration of Chechen missions (from one and a half months at the beginning of the second Chechen war to three, then six months). Away from their families for an extended period of time, unable to catch up with new laws and procedures instituted in their absence, the policemen failed at their tasks, lost their professional expertise and above all, their sense of reality: the feeling of suspicion they had been taught to harbour

towards the Chechen civilian population was transposed onto the people of their own region, distorting their relationship with the population.

10 Another psychologically aggravating factor for former combatants was the loss in 2002 of combat indemnities⁴: these indemnities were the main reason why men volunteered for missions in Chechnya (policemen essentially, because these missions were obligatory for OMONs). With the disappearance of these indemnities, commanders were led to exert pressure on men less inclined to leave. Thus from 2006 on, it became almost impossible to escape *kommandirovki* (missions) in Chechnya. These informal constraints on policemen (the volunteer principle is still officially in force) were and continue to be a cause for the departure of qualified personnel from the police department.

11 The Demos report also points out the deficiencies – in fact the quasi absence – of psychological and professional rehabilitation programmes for MVD veterans: in fact, the rehabilitation system provides no solutions to the problems raised and does not include issues of professional reintegration.

12 The chapter by Asmik Novikova on the MVD's psychological service⁵ is particularly enlightening concerning the practice of psychology in Russia and the Stalinist mentality that continues to exist today. We learn that before 2006 it was not obligatory for MVD psychologists to have been trained in psychology (any training in the natural or social sciences was sufficient); also that before that date there was no notion of confidentiality so far as psychological information was concerned. We also see the ambiguity of the institutional position of psychologists: although supposedly in charge of Chechen veterans, they are subject to the same ranking system as their colleagues and in case of a police alert can be called on to take part in patrols. In addition, psychologists depend on the Directorate of Personnel, and as such are responsible for selecting candidates for senior police staff as well as candidates for discharge, which implies a reluctance on the part of policemen to confide in them.

13 Finally, we see that the system of psychological expertise is deeply marked by a historically Russian and ideologically Stalinist concept of the individual⁶ and his psychic state, which considers trauma to be a personal weakness. From this point of view, the psychologist's job is to detect potential weaknesses before men leave on their missions. This in fact means that any hint of post-traumatic stress syndrome is proof of the psychologist's professional incompetence. Thus it is hardly surprising to find only an infinitesimal number of post-traumatic stress syndromes reported yearly by MVD psychologists.

14 The mentality at work in the MVD psychological services is clear evidence of the fact that no use has been made of previous experience in local wars. Since the 1980s, OMONs have been called up for aid in the Near Abroad provinces, but no study has yet been initiated in the Ministry on the impact on the forces of order of what can be called "combats". Nor does there seem to be any transfer of information and know-how in this area between the Interior and Defence Ministries, although the latter can claim long-term and, however unsatisfactory, extensive experience in matters of psychological and professional rehabilitation.

15 The overall picture given by the Demos study on the relationship between the Interior Ministry and between Russian society as a whole and veterans of the Chechen conflicts is worrying for several reasons: denials both of the war and of its consequences on the veterans; a refusal to see the limits of human resistance and psychic suffering; finally, the lack of professional and psychological attention given to veterans when they return to civilian life.

16 Unfortunately, the Demos report does not give statistics on the sociological profile of the men who enter the police force or the OMONs, or the number of policemen on Chechen missions from the first conflict in 1994 until now (at least in the five regions considered). It is also to be regretted that the study only briefly mentions cleansing operations (*zachistka*) against civilian Chechen populations, and that veterans were not questioned on these subjects.

17 Aside from these reservations, the Demos Centre's study is a unique and extremely precious document containing information on post-soviet society and its institutions (it managed to penetrate to the core of an institution that is opaque and closed to research in the social sciences), but also for information on state policy concerning veterans. In that particular matter, it would seem that the status of veterans and along with it, social policy in their favour, heavily depends on how the state defines war. If the state refuses to call the conflict a "war", then the war doesn't exist and veterans are not veterans, even if they themselves – as the interviews show – use only the term "war" to describe the conflict. The first Chechen conflict was officially for the purpose of "restoring constitutional order", and the second, beginning in 1999, was waged as a "struggle against terrorism". It is not surprising then, that the state should have little concern for these veterans who, in their eyes, are not veterans at all.

Notes

- 1 Tsentr Sodeistviia Provedeniuu Issledovaniu Problem Grazhdanskogo Obshestva.
- 2 Study conducted in the framework of the programme "Drawing Public Attention to the Chechen Conflict through the Prism of Issues Associated with Social Adaptation and Professional Activities of Veterans" ; also available in English in a shortened version: "Policemen in Limbo. Veterans of the Chechen Conflict in Russian Society", Moscow, Demos, 2007.
- 3 Cf. the interview with the president of the Demos centre at the time, Tanya Lokshina, published in our issue # 6/7 <http://www.pipss.org/document772.html>, May 2007.
- 4 One day of combat was the equivalent of three days of service.
- 5 See the chapter "Psikhologicheskaia sluzhba MVD", pp. 60-75.
- 6 C. Merridale, "The Collective Mind: Trauma and Shell-Shock in Twentieth-Century Russia", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 35, # 1, Special Issue: Shell-Shock, January 2000, pp. 39-55.

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