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The Social and Political Role of War Veterans

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## Interview of Tanya Lokshina, President of the Demos center, conducted by Olga Filippova, Moscow, 11 May 2007

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# Interview of Tanya Lokshina, President of the Demos center, conducted by Olga Filippova, Moscow, 11 May 2007

## Demos Veterans Project

- 1 **PIPSS.ORG** – Could you please retrace for us the history of the research program untitled “Veterans of Chechnya” and, inside it, the sub-program “Drawing Public Attention to the Chechen Conflict through the Prism of Issues Associated with Social Adaptation and Professional Activities of Veterans”?
- 2 **Tanya Lokshina:** Demos provides informative and expert-analytical work on current issues in Russia<sup>2</sup>. On the basis of our informative work, we carry out in-depth research into the issues that we judged to be most urgent. The first such study dealt with the arbitrariness (*proizvol*) of the law-enforcement system and the second - which interests you (entitled “Veterans of Chechnya: Drawing Public Attention to the Chechen Conflict through the Prism of Issues Associated with Social Adaptation and Professional Activities of Veterans”<sup>3</sup>) - deals with the situation of Police veterans. The second study was a logical continuation of the first. In our first study, some respondents referred to postings in Chechnya and spoke of the problems encountered by policemen. They said that the fact that a lot of police officers go to Chechnya has an impact on how the Ministry of the Interior works. This study is also rooted in the larger framework of our work in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. I have visited Chechnya regularly for the last four years as I carry out standard human rights monitoring there, I interview victims of human rights violations. Both my colleagues and I have heard a lot of victims’ stories, we know their point of view, how they feel, the problems they have with the armed forces, the special services, and the police and how they perceive Russian soldiers and police officers. So it seemed quite important and necessary for us to look into the other side of the coin – to investigate police officers’ perceptions of the situation: whether they feel dislike or hatred against the local population, whether they want to go to Chechnya, why they go there in the first place, what it means to them and how it influences their life and career. As a field researcher in Chechnya, I have spoken with hundreds of people to whom our policemen have done terrifying things that I would not want to describe at the moment. I got used to seeing the situation from the point of view of the local population and I have the strongest empathy for innumerable civilians victimized by the conflict, including those who were tormented and humiliated by Russian police servicemen. But having now looked at the same situation from another angle, I also cannot but feel empathy for police officers who are sent to Chechnya without proper training and get no effective rehabilitation upon return.
- 3 In any case, within the framework of our first major research effort, we were working on the broader problem of the arbitrariness in the law-enforcement system but we to see not only how society perceives the police, but also how the police perceive society. In the second study, we also tried to do something along those lines, though our topic is narrower and in many respects more complicated. Unfortunately, Chechnya has become almost a taboo subject in Russia of late and a lot of police officers who served in Chechnya refuse to speak about their respective experiences in the conflict zone, even with anonymity warranted.

## Relations with the Ministry of the Interior

- 4 **PIPSS.ORG** –What were your relations with the Ministry of the Interior?
- 5 **Tanya Lokshina:** As we began to conduct our study, we got rapidly disappointed. While we were developing the project we hoped to receive extensive cooperation, as well as “a letter of

support” from the Ministry of the Interior so that we could freely interview police officers in the regions, and so that police officers would not hesitate to speak to us or worry about how their superiors might react. Of course, such level of cooperation would make the Ministry of the Interior take our concluding recommendations seriously, because our aim was to point out to some systemic problems and give recommendations on how they can be corrected. We had negotiations with the Ministry of the Interior and their reaction was initially quite positive, particularly as there are some people in the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior who do not like what happens to the personnel sent to Chechnya. These officials do not like the fact that no rehabilitation programs exist and think that permanent assignments in Chechnya negatively influence the Ministry of the Interior as a whole.

6 We didn’t get a promise, but we were given an offer to come at the start of our project to discuss arrangements in detail and enlist their official support. Unfortunately we encountered several problems along the way. First, we spent much time elaborating our methodology, which was not an easy task, and second, we faced some difficulties in our search for financing. Half a year passed and the so-called espionage scandal happened: Russian human rights organizations were accused of working for British intelligence services<sup>4</sup>.

7 Unfortunately, it is at the height of the scandal that we came back to the Ministry of the Interior because we had already started working and needed to make arrangements. But given the tense situation of the time, our contacts at the Ministry of the Interior advised us to try to enlist the support of another governmental body. I work as an expert in the Council of the Ombudsman of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Lukin, so I went to the Ombudsman personally, explained the situation to him and he liked the project very much, so he wrote a very strong letter in support of our project. It was in fact more than I had expected, because he addressed the letter to the Minister of Interior to ask him to render us assistance and stating that he regards our project as a joint initiative of the Ombudsman and the Demos Center. This gave a “semi-official” status to our research and we hoped it would help since the Ombudsman is a quite influential figure in Russia. A few days later, he received an answer from the Ministry of the Interior; it was surely not a proper answer but an impolite refusal. The letter said that the Ombudsman’s concern about the well-being of police personnel was much appreciated, but the issues to be examined within the framework of the proposed study were to a large extent secret information and no assistance could be provided by the Ministry.

8 As a result we had to do the work we had intended to do openly unofficially and almost secretly. Together with our regional partners, we arranged interviews with policemen in five regions; we interviewed them anonymously and at times without even their immediate superiors’ knowledge. There was only one major exception which pleased and surprised me at once: our regional NGO-partner in Syktyvkar (Komi Republic) managed to get from the Ministry of the Interior regional bureau in the Komi Republic the letter of support we had failed to receive at the federal level. This probably tells a lot about Russia.

## Methodology of the Study

9 **PIPSS.ORG** - Why did you choose to focus your attention specifically on the veterans of the police? There are other forces who also served in Chechnya: the federal armed forces, the FAPSI troops, the special forces of the ministry of Justice, the Border troops, the ministry of Emergency situations’ troops etc.

10 **Tanya Lokshina**: This is a good question – why focus on the police, not the armed forces? When it comes to human rights violations in Chechnya, our armed forces have done a lot of terrible things and there are servicemen and commanders who are guilty of war crimes. There have been terrible massacres perpetrated in that region. But in our case, it is the police that particularly interests us as an institution which, on the one hand, is posted in Chechnya in a war-like situation but, on the other hand, whose servicemen come back to work in

peaceful towns after their posting in Chechnya. As an institution, the police are in permanent contact with our society. The armed forces are a separate entity and the average citizen does not interact with soldiers and army officers on a regular basis, but he or she does with the police. One of our most important tasks in this study was to show that Chechnya is not just a small republic located somewhere in the south of Russia with the population of less than one million people. Many people feel that Chechnya is a horrifying nightmare and chaos but that it is actually a very remote area and that it bears no relation to the rest of the country nor to our way of life. But in fact what the police carry home from Chechnya has a direct relation to our lives. And the fact that OMON (special-purpose police force), whose servicemen have all gone through Chechnya, is used to crack down protest marches and who use the same methods as in Chechnya has direct relation to our lives. Perhaps I am running a few steps too far, but a serviceman from OMON who had served in OMON since the inception of the unit and had just resigned at the time I spoke to him – about a year ago – told me the following: “Try to understand me. Do you realize what we do in Chechnya (he had been posted on assignments in Chechnya five times)? Do you understand what we do there, how we arrest people? And then my detachment and I are sent to patrol the streets immediately after we come home and we must detain tramps and alcoholics on the streets at night. Do you understand how we carry out those detentions? One should not even allow us to approach living people”. These are the words of a police officer.

11 **PIPSS.ORG** - But it is also important to study veterans of other forces too. Are there any research programs devoted to that?

12 **Tanya Lokshina:** Yes, of course. Another reason why we began a study of the police is that the Union of Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia already deals actively with the problems of servicemen who served in Chechnya. For example, the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers in Saint-Petersburg have published extensively on this subject. Some committed Russian psychologists have also done quality research on the issue. The “Chechen syndrome” of those who served in the armed forces is already relatively well documented, but there is no similar study of the “Chechen syndrome” of police officers. In this sphere, we are pioneers.

13 **PIPSS.ORG** - Are there any organizations that study the other forces?

14 **Tanya Lokshina:** Well, it is very difficult. Interior troops are an extremely secretive body; the same is especially true for Special Services, for the FSB. I do think that it was correct to focus our study on the police, because it was very important for us to show how they influence everyday life in Russia and what the experience of postings in Chechnya brings to society.

15 **PIPSS.ORG** - As for veterans, on what principles did you choose them for your interviews?

16 **Tanya Lokshina:** We were interested in interviewing veterans who served in Chechnya during the second war, any time between 1999 and today, although they could also have an experience of service in Chechnya during the first war. We interviewed veterans who agreed to speak to us and give us information anonymously.

17 **PIPSS.ORG** - How did you find particular veterans, did anyone help you and give information about them?

18 **Tanya Lokshina:** We worked in the regions by choice where we have strong partner organizations. Regional centers are much smaller than in the capital, so there you can really do things, which can hardly be accomplished in Moscow. Everything depended on our personal contacts: each of our regional partner organizations was acquainted with some veterans, so these organizations contacted them and explained to them the object of our study. Some police officers were genuinely interested in our study and wanted to help.

19 **PIPSS.ORG** - You have already spoken about your relationship with the Ministry of the Interior. What about families of respondents? Did you have any problems with them?

20 **Tanya Lokshina:** No, we didn’t. Moreover, we actually interviewed couples. We talked not only to police officers, but also to their spouses. It was an important part of our research work

– to find out how a wife regards her husband’s experience, his assignment in Chechnya, his current condition and how she assesses the influence it has had on his career and their family.

21 **PIPSS.ORG** - As for local authorities, did they facilitate or hinder your work?

22 **Tanya Lokshina:** They didn’t interfere. Though, they were mostly unaware of our work while it was still in progress.

23 **PIPSS.ORG** - What were the different stages of your fieldwork?

24 **Tanya Lokshina:** We first conducted a pilot study in Nizhniy Novgorod, where we had a reliable partner organization - the NN Committee against Torture. They introduced us to several high-level official of the Ministry of the Interior of the region, so we interviewed one department head, a few relatively high-ranking police officers and a psychologist who works with police personnel, including veterans. Then, we conducted unofficial individual interviews with about ten veterans and their wives. This was the start of our project. On that basis, we elaborated the final instruments of the study for the other regions where we conducted interviews in collaboration with our regional partners. We interviewed an average of 15-17 veterans in each region; we also interviewed their wives and psychologists, both independent and working within the Ministry, and finally journalists who had written on the subject.

## Rehabilitation Programs for Veterans

25 **PIPSS.ORG** – What is the situation as to rehabilitation programs?

26 **Tanya Lokshina:** There is a continuous flow of police officers who are sent to Chechnya. In theory, police officers must undergo a rehabilitation program after they come back from Chechnya, but in reality this does not happen. Some of them manage to take all the vacation due to them after deployment, so they start working a month and a half or two after they get back home. But very often police officers are told: “Are you going to take a leave now? How can we let you? We are about to send a new group to Chechnya, we lack personnel here, we can’t give you a leave now, you’ll have an opportunity to take one later”.

27 As a result, a police officer frequently starts working just a couple of weeks after the end of his assignment in Chechnya. Their psychological trauma is not remedied; they do not rest and they do not get psychological help. One of the main findings of our study I can already talk about is the necessity to pay more attention to the psychological service within the Ministry of the Interior and the way it works. There are psychologists on the staff of the Ministry and there are also psychologists in the units that are sent to Chechnya. We have spoken to several such psychologists. One of their key messages is: “You see, we are first of all policemen and then psychologists. That is how we are regarded”. When psychologists go to Chechnya with these units, they take part in mop-up operations (the so-called *zachistki* and watch over the road-blocs; they are on duty just as other police personnel. In addition, they write reports for their chief in Hankala’s headquarters, assessing the condition of their unit’s personnel; but those assessments frequently have nothing to do with the real situation. They are rather perceived as a mere formality.

28 From my point of view, it is a crying shame that those psychologists, being employed by the Ministry of the Interior, are accountable to superiors inside the Ministry. The whole health service is under the authority of the Ministry. Moreover, a member of the Ministry’s staff cannot go an independent clinic if he has psychological problems, he cannot consult a good specialist that has been recommended to them. He can only turn to a doctor of the Ministry of the Interior. But then, the information will reflect on his personal records. Consider the following situation: a police officer comes back form Chechnya and has psychological problems; he wants to complain to somebody, to tell that there is something wrong with him, for example in case of continuous nightmares and insomnia. The police officer is very cautious about consulting a psychologist who works within the Ministry of the Interior for fear of damaging his career. Basically, policemen refrain from seeking psychological assistance even

if they are badly in need. They do not complain because there is no independent doctor and no independent assessments. Everything is interconnected.

29 **PIPSS.ORG** - Do you think that there should be an independent organization to which a police officer could turn to for help?

30 **Tanya Lokshina:** I am convinced that there should be specialists providing psychological help to police officers, especially to those who have served in Chechnya, but not only to them. Police officers must be confident that not a single word of what they tell a specialist will be transmitted to any third party under any circumstances. In short, yes, it is an absolutely necessary; otherwise what rehabilitation can we speak of?

31 **PIPSS.ORG** – Has any research been done on the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs?

32 **Tanya Lokshina:** Well, I do not have sufficient expertise to talk about rehabilitation programs in the armed forces, but there is certainly no such research on rehabilitation programs for police officers. There are innovative rehabilitation initiatives in a few Russian regions but they are not fully developed.

33 **PIPSS.ORG** – What about the Afghan war? Was any experience gained in terms of rehabilitation programs? Has it been used in any way?

34 **Tanya Lokshina:** Unfortunately not. This experience is perhaps invaluable, but it is not at all reflected and nothing has been done on the basis of this experience<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, these were hard times for the country, it was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the smitten State obviously had no time for such reflections.

35 **PIPSS.ORG** - But if no psychological rehabilitation programs exist, do problems and psychological disorders recur?

36 **Tanya Lokshina:** Yes, this is the case. What do senior police officers complain about? They say that the assignments that police officers have in Chechnya lead to the deprofessionalisation (*deprofesionalizatsia*) of the personnel of the Ministry of the Interior. They stress that some servicemen become inapt and that it causes disciplinary problems. Those servicemen never really come back home – it becomes difficult for them to work in normal circumstances. Consequently, another problem that senior officials mention is the extremely high turnover of personnel which, to a significant extent, is caused by assignments in Chechnya. At present, the term of an assignment is six months, this is too long. Moreover, the personnel of the Ministry of the Interior do not have a choice. They are not legally obliged to go to Chechnya, but in reality they must.

37 This is particularly true for the special task police force personnel. I asked this question to a lot of them and they all answered that if you don't want to be assigned in Chechnya, you'd better not serve in OMON. They are sent to Chechnya regularly. Many of them have been posted in Chechnya five or more times, and as a result, family problems surface and divorce rates rise sharply. Their wives can't stand such life, because at first their husbands are away for six months and when they come back, they become aggressive. Police officers drink a lot – alcoholism is one of evident problems. They start drinking very heavily in Chechnya and do not give it up at home.

38 In theory, they are supposed to be given a leave in the middle of their six-month deployment term, but in reality only those who live in nearby regions can do it. For instance, if a police officer serves in Chechnya and lives in Krasnodar, he might go back home. But if he is from Saint-Petersburg, he simply cannot afford it; it is too expensive to go. So they stay in Chechnya for half a year, their family life is jeopardized and consequently, they may have to choose whether they want to keep their families or their job. As a result, many of them resign.

39 I also conducted brief interviews in checkpoints in Chechnya. The first police officer I interviewed told me exactly the same: if there is one element to stress about existent problems, it is that regular deployments to Chechnya result in deprofessionalisation of police personnel, that they ruin Russian police force.

## The Risk of Deprofessionalisation

40 **PIPSS.ORG** - So what does “deprofessionalisation” mean? Does it mean that police officers are unable to work in peaceful circumstances after they come back from Chechnya?

41 **Tanya Lokshina:** It means, in particular, that intelligent and well-trained personnel resign because they cannot live in such conditions: they are dissatisfied with their endless assignments in Chechnya. As a result, new, untrained people join the police. There is a permanent problem of recruitment. Some of those rookies are poorly educated and ill-fit for them job, it is necessary to spend much time to train them properly but there is no time available as someone has to do day-to day work. It’s a vicious circle. Also, some police officers develop the post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of their stay in Chechnya and the lack of proper rehabilitation. They cannot cope with their duties, become aggressive, prone to violence and to a high degree socially inapt. However, they continue working because they cannot be replaced.

## The Social Situation of Chechen War Veterans

42 **PIPSS.ORG** - What conclusions can you draw with regards to the social situation of Chechen war veterans today? Does the State help them and does it support them and if yes, how?

43 **Tanya Lokshina:** We have investigated this subject in depth. Veterans do not get adequate support from the state. Those veterans whom I have personally interviewed generally live in appalling conditions. They receive neither psychological nor social help. Namely, veterans are entitled to some benefits but access to those benefits is so difficult that the veterans themselves describe the situation as humiliating. Quite naturally police officers feel that the State has abandoned and betrayed them. They protected the interests of their homeland but the State doesn’t care about them.

44 **PIPSS.ORG** - As for other employment opportunities?

45 **Tanya Lokshina:** Their situation is quite hopeless. And certainly, they are not provided with any assistance with professional re-training and/or help to find new employment.

46 **PIPSS.ORG** - But what happens if they resign?

47 **Tanya Lokshina:** They do not have much chance to find another job. Where can they go from the Ministry of the Interior? Ironically, the armed forces, which could have used OMON fighters with extensive combat experience, are not an option for them because their rank does not transfer. There is no system of conversion, and they would have to start from the very bottom of the ladder. Some join private security services or criminal groups; actually private security services are quite often also criminal. Of course, there are some strong, capable people with high integrity who resign and make another career. For example we spoke to a young man who is now a successful lawyer. While he was working in the Ministry of the Interior he obtained a law degree, and at the earliest opportunity, he resigned from the police force. But the majority of police officers we spoke to were in a sad situation. Nobody wants to hire them; nobody needs them or wants to deal with them. There is no way out.

## Veterans Organizations

48 **PIPSS.ORG** – Have Chechen police veterans founded any organisation of movement to protect their rights? Or have they joined already existing veteran movements related to Afghan war?

49 **Tanya Lokshina:** There are a lot of veteran organizations all across the country, including Afghan veterans and Chechen veterans’ organizations. There are mainly soldiers in these organizations but police officers can join them. I would say that one of the objects of struggle for Russian police officers who served in Chechnya is the payment of so-called combat allowances. Non-payment or delays of such allowances is something that many veterans complain about. For this purpose, they establish organizations, start legal actions, fight against the State in court and at times actually succeed.

- 50 **PIPSS.ORG** - You say that they succeed from time to time. Can one say that they are influential?
- 51 **Tanya Lokshina:** If a court rules in their favour, they may be able to change their situation, but it is a difficult and long procedure. Many veterans are aided by lawyers who charge extortionate fees. Finally, there are no chances on systemic level – individual cases can be won but the problem persists. The combat allowance remains one of the main stumbling blocks. As one of my respondents described it, “at first when combat allowances were paid, the point of contention was how many days of combat were counted and there were permanent conflicts on this ground. Now there is almost no combat allowance, because the war has been officially declared over two years ago. And no matter what happens in reality, you are not going to get this money.” This also causes a lot of frustration. To explain, during the first years of the second Chechen war, the policemen that were sent down to Chechnya had a strong financial motivation – their combat allowances made a serious difference to their respective incomes. However, nowadays, there is no such motivation but they still have to travel to Chechnya on a regular basis. I am not saying that financial motivation could solve the problem, but the lack of those allowances really contributes to the general sense of frustration among police personnel.
- 52 **PIPSS.ORG** - But there are still combat operations.
- 53 **Tanya Lokshina:** At times. In 2006, I was told by some respondents that there is an unofficial agreement that police officers who serve in Chechnya will get monetary compensation equivalent to two days of combat per month. One may regard it as a bonus. However, those same respondents complained that this agreement is not always fulfilled, because combat allowance is registered in Hankala, at the main Russian military base in Chechnya, and a lot of nepotism is involved in the process. The officials in charge try to help their friends and acquaintances. Hence, someone might receive five days of combat allowance and someone else – none.
- 54 **PIPSS.ORG** - As far as I understand, the attitude of the senior officials towards veterans fighting for their rights is negative?
- 55 **Tanya Lokshina:** If a group of police officers who served in Chechnya hasn't got their money in full, their superiors won't mind them starting court action, because they are themselves embittered and dissatisfied with the fact. But the higher leadership is of course displeased to see veterans go to court.
- 56 In any case, the situation with benefits definitely represents a major point of contention but it's not the only one. Chechnya veterans in Russian police force feel that they form a completely separate category of people. This is particularly true for OMON officers. They regard themselves as Special Elite Forces, but sometimes they are used just as regular cops. Some OMON officers stressed to us, for example, that they found themselves in much worse conditions than SOBR<sup>6</sup> because SOBR is used for its intended purpose only. OMON officers, in contrast, are sent to patrol streets after they return from yet another mission to Chechnya, while SOBR personnel go to back to their base and continue combat training.
- 57 **PIPSS.ORG** - So SOBR personnel do have leisure time, don't they?
- 58 **Tanya Lokshina:** They maintain their professional level, so to speak. And their used for limited purposes only. The situation of police officers with Chechen experience is very different. It is as if they were between two worlds: they have combat experience but this experience only interferes with their regular work. Many respondents told that they find the skills acquired in Chechnya either unnecessary or detrimental or even dangerous once they return back home.
- 59 **PIPSS.ORG** - Does it also influence the deprofessionalisation of the police?
- 60 **Tanya Lokshina:** Yes, quite significantly. It is generally believed that the Ministry of the Interior personnel who serve in Chechnya belong only to OMON. But in practice, it turns out not to be true. The Ministry of the Interior does not manage to man OMON detachments fully, so police officers from other bodies are also sent there and become part of the so-called

combined police units (SOM). The situation of police officers is still a bit different, they rarely have more than five or six assignments in Chechnya. In theory they can also refuse to be deployed there. In practice, pressure from their superiors and peer-pressure makes it impossible not to reject such an assignment.

61 Firstly, going to Chechnya is part of an initiation or compulsory socialization process for new police personnel. New rookies are surrounded by older police officers who had been to Chechnya. So, they don't want to fall behind, they want to be seen as tough. If those young officers go to Chechnya only once everything may turn out fine. But they may have a second assignment in Chechnya or the first one may be very traumatic, or they simply get hooked on Chechnya and psychologically never return to peaceful life. As a result they also become inapt and cannot work normally.

62 Secondly – and even more important! – there is such a thing as corporate solidarity. Those police servicemen who are asked to go on assignment to Chechnya and are very reluctant to do so, at the same time fully realize that their superiors received orders to put a group together. Thus, a certain number of people from their unit will have to go. And if he refuses, one of his colleagues will have to be sent instead. As today, due to the lack of financial motivation, few people actually volunteer, many police officers find themselves going to Chechnya against their will because this is the only way not to put their friends and their immediate superiors in a tight spot.

## Police Brutality

63 **PIPSS.ORG** - But veterans of other forces may also join private security agencies. Do you think that they also contribute to the arbitrariness of the law-enforcement and the brutalization of society?

64 **Tanya Lokshina:** It is necessary to study the work of security services more in depth to answer this question. This is an interesting topic but our study did not directly address it.

65 **PIPSS.ORG** - Can you forecast how far this may go if no preventive measures are taken, if no psychological rehabilitation program is put in place, and if the length of assignments in Chechnya and of leaves of absence is maintained unchanged ?

66 **Tanya Lokshina:** The Russian police will gradually become more and more dysfunctional. The more the situation is left unchanged, the more severely it will deteriorate.

67 **PIPSS.ORG** - What are the possible consequences of this phenomenon?

68 **Tanya Lokshina:** The Russian police is already poisoned with the so-called “chechenophobia” and aggressive dislike for other nations of the Caucasus. The results of our study in the Tver’ Region, for example, say a lot on how local police officers who have been to Chechnya attempt to persecute Chechens and Caucasians, take a sort of a revenge on them. In particular, if one of their fellow officers has been killed in Chechnya, these policemen seem to want to grind down all Caucasians.

69 The problem of excessive and unjustified use of police violence - for example the violent dispersal of public rallies - is also evident and will only worsen in the future. Situations like the one in Blagoveschensk<sup>7</sup> may become more prevalent. In a small town of Bashkiria – compare the geographical location of Chechnya and Bashkiria – a clampdown according to Chechen standard took place unexpectedly. The local police detained around a thousand people and detained them for two days without legitimate reason, including in illegal confinement facilities. Many detainees were subjected to cruel and degrading treatment. And it happens that some of the police servicemen who perpetrated this Chechnya-style mop-up operation had had assignments in the Chechen Republic. Thus, their Chechen experience of lawlessness and violence was transported across the country.

70 Blagoveshchensk came to be known as the “beaten” town. But Blagoveshchensk is not the only case; other examples of that sort exist on a smaller scale. For instance, there were similar events in Tver Region and Krasnodarskiy Krai<sup>8</sup>; they are just on a smaller scale and less spoken

of. If we don't take drastic measures, the situation will only get worse: there will be more police violence and arbitrariness and the already dramatic public distrust of the police will deepen even further. A society where citizens change sidewalks if they see a police officer is very unhealthy, to say the least. People in Russia do not only distrust the police, they say openly that the police don't work for the well-being of citizens nor to protect people's interests<sup>9</sup>. In their perception, the police are an institution that works for its own sake, as opposed to in the interests of the public, and can actually do harm. This situation is absolutely abnormal.

71 **PIPSS.ORG** – Do you suggest that there have been clashes between the police and the population as a result of this?

72 **Tanya Lokshina:** It is almost a miracle that there have been no severe clashes between the police and demonstrators at the “marches of dissents”<sup>10</sup>. Yet, because our police act so roughly, so unjustifiably aggressively, it may provoke demonstrators into violent actions acts.

73 Fortunately it hasn't happened yet but I can't exclude such possibility in the future. There are some absolutely odd examples of police behaviour, for instance during the so-called Marijuana March that took place only a few days ago. About twenty-five young men and women went down on Arbat Street in the center of Moscow to demand the legalization of marijuana. They didn't smoke any substance and didn't violate the law; they just came out to the street with their placards. Why were so many of them beaten and mistreated? What motivated the police to such violent actions? This remains an open question.

74 **PIPSS.ORG** - Did the veterans speak about arbitrariness of the law-enforcement? How did they describe it?

75 **Tanya Lokshina:** They said that the change is very hard, that in Chechnya they worked in difficult circumstances according to specific rules and they didn't have any time to adapt when they got back home. They had to fulfill their duty in their hometowns in completely different circumstances. They spoke about this issue, but I couldn't say that they were clear about it. They have not fully digested their Chechen experience and its consequences. The overall level of dissatisfaction among veterans is very high. Most of them say that the State has abandoned them and that it doesn't do anything for them: they have done so much for the State but the State won't stir a finger for them.

76 **PIPSS.ORG** - But despite all this, they still come back to their police stations. Is there perhaps no alternative for them?

77 **Tanya Lokshina:** This is exactly what a lot of the respondents have told me. I saw police officers that lived with their whole family in one room, sometimes in hostels. They earn very little, are dissatisfied with everyone and everything and complain continuously and curse the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior and everything relevant to their work. When asked if they had ever thought of resigning they generally answered that they didn't know where they could go after they resign but, if they did, they would leave. Of course it provokes malevolence and aggression in them that they then release in their everyday work.

78 **PIPSS.ORG** - In your opinion, what measures, besides rehabilitation, should be taken to improve the situation?

79 **Tanya Lokshina:** For police officers that serve in Chechnya, the first measure should be to reduce the length of postings. It is clear that the current six months postings are due in part to financial considerations; it is expensive to get people to Chechnya and bring them back. But it is necessary to care for the personnel more; our State is rich enough and can afford it. It is necessary for police officers to undergo psychological examination before they start their tour of duty and proper rehabilitation once they return. Medical rehabilitation is important as such, but not sufficient. The psychological service of the Ministry of the Interior must be strengthened; it must acquire quasi-independent status to be effective. Psychologists should not be, as they now are, regarded as cops. Psychologists should not take part in special operations and patrol streets on days of public marches or special police operation; they must

do their real work for which they now do not have time for. Psychologists should be given adequate office premises and equipment. They should receive effective professional training. It is necessary that the psychological tests of the Ministry are made correctly and carefully to decide whether to send particular individuals to Chechnya or not. .

80 **PIPSS.ORG** - You mean that people who, according to test results, should not be sent to Chechnya are sent there anyways?

81 **Tanya Lokshina:** Yes, there is no doubt about it. There is a set of standard tests of psychological stability. The psychologists that test police officers work with them on a day to day basis. Consider the following situation, which was reported by some respondents: a police officer goes to a psychologist of the Ministry and says that he is being posted in Chechnya and needs to undergo psychological tests, which include instructions to draw some pictures. The police officer asks the psychologist directly what to draw in order to pass the test and not be bothered again. The psychologist then explains – one cop to another – that he should draw a sun, children and flowers as opposed to crocodiles, for example. So, in reality, the results of these tests are meaningless. Moreover, several respondents told us that some people who did not pass the tests (the results showed that these police officers were unstable) were still posted there because their superiors wanted to send complete detachments or because they really wanted to go. As I have mentioned, with those who get their first assignment in Chechnya, there is some machismo involved: they say: “I am a real man; I’ll prove it to everyone”. Also, policemen do not want to have a note in their personal records that states that they are psychologically unstable.

82 **PIPSS.ORG** - When they come back from Chechnya, do they pass any tests to determine whether they can continue to work?

83 **Tanya Lokshina:** They undergo the same set of tests of psychological stability, but some respondents told us that even these are sometimes not used. Psychologists complained, in fact, that it’s difficult to get the returnees to come in to take the tests. This problem is generally ignored.

84 Even in the relatively prosperous regions where there exists some sort of “quasi-rehabilitation”. For example, in some regions, policemen who come back from Chechnya are sent to a sanatorium for two weeks. These men have a genuine medical check-up there, and receive treatment if necessary. But psychological rehabilitation mostly revolves around drinking vodka. Police officers say that in reality the only psychological relief they get is when they speak to their peers. Those who have been on difficult assignments in Chechnya, those who saw their fellow officers killed are themselves in terrifying situations. I remember that a very young police officer told me that just before the elections in Chechnya in 2003, his detachment was sent to a small remote village in the mountains. They stayed in the local school building which was to serve as a polling station. They didn’t understand where they were and what was going on; they had just been taken away from the valley and sent to that village. They didn’t sleep for several days because it was rumored that insurgents were going to come to the village and kill them all. One gets severe trauma in such situations. Since they do not receive any psychological help, what they do is meet, buy a few bottles of alcohol and share their memories. It is also important to underline that they do not share with their wives the problems that they face in Chechnya.

85 **PIPSS.ORG** - Why? Did they explain it somehow?

86 **Tanya Lokshina:** Well, according to them, their wives cannot understand because they haven’t gone through life in Chechnya themselves. Besides, police officers do not want to worry their wives. As far as I am aware, in some cases, their wives never heard the stories that the policemen told our interviewers. I keep recalling one particular respondent, who told my colleague the same terrifying story ten times over, related to his first assignment in Chechnya. In the very beginning of the war, some policemen from his police station were sent to Chechnya

and one of them was killed after a month of duty. The respondent (a senior officer) was sent to Masdok, where the main morgue is located, to retrieve the body and bring it back to his family. He didn't know anything about what was really happening in Chechnya. Actually, many policemen are saying the same thing: "We didn't understand what was happening; it was all a complete surprise for us".

87 In any case, that officer watched TV and read official reports and consulted official statistics. According to the latter, the number of victims among Russian servicemen and police officers was very small. He was not aware of the real numbers of Russian losses. So that officer went to Masdok. According to him, there was a huge field morgue there; it was "an endless field with tents". After he showed his documents to the person in charge, he was told: "If you know him by sight, then go and look for him". And he walked on that field for more than three hours, looking into every tent. They were all full of maimed corpses. He was shocked, he couldn't understand what was happening, he thought that not more than a hundred people in total had been killed. He began to count how many corpses there were in each tent, then multiplied it by the number of tents and got a staggering number as a result. He then asked people who worked there how often the corpses were removed and was told that a train comes for them every three days.

88 My colleague was shocked by that story. She was also going to interview his wife but didn't manage to in the end, particularly as the man kept her there for a long time after the interview was formally over, repeating that same nightmarish tale. He simply could not be stopped. So we decided that I would go back in two days and interview the man's spouse. They lived in a tiny flat situated very far on the outskirts of the city. The officer's wife opened the door but then he appeared and suggested that we had a cup of tea before I spoke to his wife. I didn't need to talk to him and I had little time but it was impolite to refuse, so I agreed, thinking how I could end this conversation quickly and interview his wife in private. It was difficult because some police officers did not want to let us speak to their wives in private; they wanted to be present during our conversation. This was a recurring problem but we always managed to solve it. So we were drinking tea and suddenly I noticed that his eyes became dull and that he started retelling the same story he had told my colleague. I didn't know what to do. I tried to change the subject of the conversation, asked him questions about his children but he would go on telling me that story. He spoke for about an hour. He knew that I came to speak to his wife only. But he simply could not help himself.

89 In fact, we had other cases when policemen seemed very skeptical and reluctant to talk at first. They would tell us that there was nothing to say and that our study was a complete nonsense. But soon after, they just use the opportunity to tell us what they feel and reveal what they have on their heart. Some of them would curse the State, because the State must protect them, but it doesn't give anything to them and places them in these situations.

90 **PIPSS.ORG** - Do you think that the Russian police should be deployed in Chechnya?

91 **Tanya Lokshina:** No, I don't think that our police should be deployed there. It was a political decision to send them there; the police was used because the situation in Chechnya is officially an antiterrorist operation and not a war. Politically it was very important, but it has negatively influenced the work of our police as an institution and the situation of police officers in particular. It has also had negative impacts on society in general. I wish it hadn't happened.

92 However, as it appears that deployment of Russian policemen to Chechnya will continue, there is one research finding of ours that I would like to stress. From the point of view of how police officers interact with the local population and how they adjust, those who are attached to the Chechen police on a contract basis serve better and suffer less of a social "disadaptation". They go to Chechnya primarily for financial reasons because contractual wages are much higher than their regular wages; they try to solve their problems with housing or some other problems that way. They sign a contract and serve in the Ministry of the Interior in Chechnya for a year.

They serve together with the Chechens; they work as district police officers and interact daily with the local population. They have to build a relationship with the locals simply in order to survive and cannot afford engaging in lawless and unnecessary acts of violence. They are also in constant interaction with the locals so they do not develop most of the negative stereotypes of Chechens that other policemen do. It's also very important that they all work on voluntary basis. Only those that want to work in Chechnya and are ready to do it are sent there on a contract basis. So, if the State needs the police to be in Chechnya, such contractual service is definitely the least of possible evils.

93 **PIPSS.ORG** – The negative impacts of sending policemen to Chechnya are obvious. In your opinion, is there any possibility that this practice will end? Or is it perhaps convenient for senior officials to keep things as there are?

94 **Tanya Lokshina:** Although we couldn't obtain official comments, and as far as I understand, senior officers are dissatisfied with the fact that policemen are sent to Chechnya. But if they are withdrawn, who will do their work? Yes, the number of checkpoints has been reduced, but some still remain in place. Who will work there? It seems that the Russian government does not trust the Chechen forces to do the job.

## Forthcoming Results

95 **PIPSS.ORG** – As far as I understand the project is now over.

96 **Tanya Lokshina:** Yes.

97 **PIPSS.ORG** - Concerning the results and analysis you already have, what are the main conclusions of your study?

98 **Tanya Lokshina:** As I have already mentioned, they are: the deprofessionalisation of the personnel of the Ministry of the Interior, lack of rehabilitation programs, and problems of social adaptation encountered by policemen upon their return home.

99 **PIPSS.ORG** - Are you going to continue this program on Chechen veterans in any way?

100 **Tanya Lokshina:** I rather meant that our field work is completed - all relevant information has been gathered and we are now the stage of analysis. After we analyze everything, study results and make specific recommendations, we will certainly work to advance these recommendations. I am sure that we won't give up on this issue.

101 **PIPSS.ORG** – And when is the book going to be published?

102 **Tanya Lokshina:** The book is to be published in September 2007.

103 **PIPSS.ORG** - What will it contain?

104 **Tanya Lokshina:** The book will contain reports on the regions where the study was conducted, notes on study methodology, various texts on the specific problems encountered by police officers serving in Chechnya and discussions of problems of rehabilitation, social adaptation and employment of police officers and finally, of their perception of their professional situation. It will also contain texts on the motivation of police officers to serve in Chechnya and whether they regard the present situation in Chechnya as a war; texts about what wives' perceptions of their husbands' service and their view on the help their husbands and family should receive. There will also be materials on the legal framework surrounding the service of police officers and benefits associated to their function.

105 **PIPSS.ORG** - Regarding what has already been done, could you say that the Demos Centre has influenced public policy concerning veterans or that it has attracted attention to the problems which were perhaps previously overlooked?

106 **Tanya Lokshina:** I would say that when our book comes out it will attract attention because no such publications exist as of now. I hope that it will be closely looked at by the Ministry of the Interior. What have we already achieved? We have led the way for several publications on the subject and we have managed to interest some organizations about this topic. We've had some in-depth discussions with the regional police. When the real product comes out, we will be able to say how much of a difference we were able to make.

- 107 **PIPSS.ORG** – From your point of view, what organisations, besides the Ministry of the Interior, will be interested in the results of your research?
- 108 **Tanya Lokshina:** The results of our research will also be of particular interest to the research institutes affiliated to the Ministry. There is good reason to believe that our publication will interest the Presidential Human Rights Council of the Russian Federation. The Ombudsman has already demonstrated his genuine commitment. Taking into consideration that one of our key points is the absence of effective rehabilitation programs, our study will also be of interest to the Ministry of Health and Social Development of the Russian Federation. So it concerns a lot of governmental organizations. At the same time, we expect the issue to be of great interest to the media, to the academic community, and to the broader public.
- 109 **PIPSS.ORG:** We are looking forward to the results of your study. Thank you for this interview.

### Notes

1 Tanya (Tatiana) Lokshina has a degree in Philology; she has been working in human rights organizations for the last nine years. She started in Moscow Helsinki Group (the oldest contemporary Russian human rights organization) working on international programs and ended up being its executive director. As MHG turned into a resource centre supporting human right organizations throughout Russia with the help of MHG Tanya and her team established Demos as a research centre working in the sphere of human rights. The centre has existed for three years already, its name implies that the Russian nation is *demos* and not *okhlos* (from the Greek – (with contempt) the ignorant multitude, the populace). [Interviewer’s note]

2 The activities of the centre are both research and informational (including daily topical news in the sphere of democracy and human rights in Russia, the Political Barometer, also known as the Barometer of Democracy, monthly reviews of the situation in Chechnya and Northern Caucasus, reviews of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights regarding the Russian Federation and articles on protest marches and the situation of non-governmental organizations; for more information about informational, see <http://www.demos-center.ru/projects/649C353/>), [Interviewer’s note]

3 <http://www.demos-center.ru/projects/66AA75D/>, [Editor’s note]

4 In January 2006, the FSB accused several employees of the British Embassy in Moscow of espionage and funding Russian NGOs. [Editor’s note]

5 See for instance the work of the French psychologist Françoise Sironi who founded a rehabilitation center for Afghan veterans in Perm in the 90s, “L’ethnopsychiatrie au service des vétérans russes de la guerre d’Afghanistan”, in *Le Journal des Psychologues*, n° 160, septembre 1998, pp. 52-57. [Editor’s note]

6 A Special Rapid Reaction Unit within the Ministry of Interior. [Editor’s note]

7 In the city of Blagoveshchensk, a special operation was conducted in the period from 10 through 14 December 2004 by the special task police unit (OMON) of Bashkortostan MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) and by the Blagoveshchensk city and district police department (GROVD) for the purpose of “stabilizing operational situation”, as stated in the order of the Minister for Internal Affairs of Bashkortostan. According to the human rights organizations which conducted independent investigation of the events, in the course of this operation police forces apprehended and detained about 1 000 people. During the arrest and in the course of detention, policemen used force, though in majority of cases the residents of Blagoveshchensk did not resist detention. About 200 people were beaten on the streets. [Editor’s note]

8 In the year 2005 in other regions of the Russian Federation, police forces conducted similar preventative operations of smaller scale. For instance on February 5, 2005 police forces conducted “preventative operation” in the village Rozhdestveno of Tver Region. In June 2005, in the town of Ivanskoe in the Kochygbeevskii Raion, Interior Ministry troops rounded up more than 30 youths, about this event see : Julie Corwin “Police brutality reminiscent of Chechnya”, *RFE/RL Newslines*, vol. 9, # 118, part I, 22 June 2005, end note. [Editor’s note]

9 On police violence see <http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cat/docs/ngos/joint-russian-report-new.pdf>; or more recently Yakov Gilinskiy's report on police brutality: *Социология насилия. Произвол правоохранительных органов глазами граждан.* - Нижний Новгород: Комитет против пыток, 2006, 71 стр. (Научное издание). [Editor's note]

10 *Marshi nesoglasnikh*. Several protest marches took place in Russia (in particular in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg) during April, May and June 2007. Many protesters were beaten and arrested by the police. [Editor's note]

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