

Cold War Tactics

Drugging and Detention: Beslan cases reminiscent of Soviet practices.

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Georgian television reporter Nana Lezhava spent three brutal days covering the horrors of the Beslan school siege, interviewing grief-stricken families and trying to find some truth amid the dizzying array of official deception. Yet her own ordeal was just about to begin.

On September 4, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor agency to the KGB, detained Lezhava and cameraman Levan Tetvadze on a specious border viola-

tion for five days. Lezhava was interrogated, tried, subjected to an involuntary gynecological exam, and slipped a dose of a psychotropic drug.

“They asked me if I taste cognac in the coffee,” she said in a recent interview, matter-of-factly recounting details that seemed drawn from a Cold War-era spy novel. “They said they gave some to me because I was so cold. I don’t remember anything after that. When

I came to, it was 24 hours later and I was in an FSB detention cell.”

The government’s use of *spetsoperatsii*—covert, KGB-style special operations—to silence independent journalists has become a disturbing development in today’s Russia, especially when it comes to the conflict in Chechnya. Nowhere was the practice more evident than

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Rustavi 2

Nana Lezhava returns to Georgia after five days of detention in Russia, during which she was interrogated and drugged.

in the North Ossetian town of Beslan; more than a dozen journalists reported being obstructed or detained while trying to cover the deadly hostage crisis there.

Among journalists, poisonings and bogus detentions bring to mind Soviet-era cases such as the notorious 1978 murder of exiled Bulgarian writer Georgi Markov, who was felled in London by a hit man firing a poison pellet from an umbrella. Investigators said the KGB helped Bulgarian agents carry out the assassination. Eight years later, Soviet agents planted secret documents on Nicholas Daniloff, Moscow correspondent for *U.S. News & World Report*, and then detained him for two weeks while they bargained for the release of a Soviet agent being held in New York.

The FSB and the Kremlin did not respond to written questions submitted by the Committee to Protect Journalists about Lezhava or other Beslan cases.

Reporting for Rustavi-2, Lezhava and Tetvadze crossed the border on September 1 without difficulty and soon went on the air with a live feed, saying that the number of hostages was around 1,400—a figure far higher and more accurate than the official estimate of 354.

By September 4, after the crisis had exploded in violence that left hundreds dead, Lezhava and other journalists were interviewing hysterical relatives who were desperate to cut through the bureaucratic chaos and learn whether their missing children were dead or alive. An observer who identified himself as an employee of the Russian Foreign Ministry, which accredits journalists for work in Russia and keeps track of their coverage, singled out Lezhava.

“He told me, ‘You are a very active lady,’” she recalled, an observation that still surprises her. “I can’t imagine a journalist who is not active. What kind of journalist are you if you are not active and interested in what is happening?”

The ministry representative summoned the FSB. Lezhava and Tetvadze were detained—first in Beslan and then in Vladikavkaz—and their camera, phones, cassettes, microphone, and other equipment were seized. They were accused of illegally crossing the border. While Georgians and Russians need visas to visit each other, Lezhava and Tetvadze are registered in Kazbegi, a Georgian border district whose residents carry passport inserts known as *vkladyshi* that give them the right to spend 10 days in Russia without a visa.

But in the custody of the FSB, Lezhava said, “The inserts simply disappeared. They took them and stole them.” So the two were tried on the border violation and Lezhava’s medical exam was administered, she said, on the pretense that it was required before entering an FSB prison. Lezhava remembers little after being drugged, which apparently happened when seemingly solicitous security agents served her coffee and sandwiches.

By September 8, amid a growing international outcry, an FSB general came from Moscow. Apologies were made, a television camera brought in, and the two were instructed to say that they hadn’t been tortured or hurt. Lezhava and Tetvadze were allowed to pay a fine and taken to the border where Georgian officials met them.

Lezhava was examined by doctors upon her return to Tbilisi. Gela Lezhava, chairman of the supervisory board of the Narcology Research Institute, said traces of a drug



Mourners weep over the coffins of hostages killed in the Beslan school siege.

AP/Ivan Sekretarev

from the benzodiazepine group were found in her system, the Kavkasia-Press news agency reported. Georgia's Health and Social Security Minister Lado Chipashvili also said traces of a psychotropic substance were present.

Lezhava was hospitalized for five days and suffered from frequent headaches. When she recounted the events in a telephone interview six months later, she was working again and had just returned from an assignment in the Pankissi Gorge enclave between Chechnya and Georgia, where she reported on Chechen refugees' reactions to the killing of rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov by Russian security forces.

CPJ and others have documented additional cases of obstruction and retaliation involving Beslan. Amr Abdul Hamid, Moscow bureau chief of the Dubai-based satellite television channel Al-Arabiya, was detained while returning from Beslan; Raf Shakirov, editor-in-chief of the leading daily *Izvestia*, was forced out after his paper's critical coverage of the siege. But the cases of two prominent war correspondents, Andrei Babitsky and Anna Politkovskaya, have drawn particular attention.

Babitsky, the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist famous for his coverage of Chechnya, was pulled off a September 2 flight that was to have taken him from the Vnukovo Airport to Mineralniye Vody. He then planned to travel on to Beslan.

But Babitsky was told traces of explosives were found on his checked luggage. By the time the luggage was reinspected and cleared, the flight had left and two young strangers had come upon the scene. The men demanded Babitsky buy them beer and followed him when he refused. When voices were raised, the airport police descended and detained Babitsky on a charge of "hooliganism."

While all three were in custody, Babitsky recalled in an interview, the men acknowledged that they worked for the airport's parking-lot security and had been instructed by a security chief to provoke a fight. Babitsky, who eventually paid a fine of about \$34, never made it to Beslan. He describes the whole episode as "very Soviet in character."

The case of Anna Politkovskaya is more mysterious. The *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper reporter, whose searing stories about Chechnya have won her international acclaim, was also on her way to Beslan on September 2. After drinking tea on a flight to Rostov-on-Don, Politkovskaya became violently ill and lost consciousness. She, too, never made it to the school siege, although the cause of her illness has not been determined.

Politkovskaya has declined to talk about her case, but *Novaya Gazeta* Editor Dmitry Muratov said he is convinced she was poisoned to prevent her from getting to Beslan. "All these cases," Muratov said ruefully, "are very strange." ■