

International Human Rights Pressure, the Strategic use of Forced Disappearances: The Case
of the Second Chechen War 1999-2009

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Prepared for the *Human Rights in an Age of Ambiguity Conference*, New York City, June 13-15,
2016.

ABSTRACT

We argue that repressive political leaders are rational utility maximizers acting strategically in their choice amongst types of repression. Choices amongst repression types depend partly upon leaders being held responsible for their particular actions. We argue that some decision-makers who wish to continue with repression will respond to increasing scrutiny of their state's human rights record by firstly conceding that human rights violations may have taken place, but blame the opposition for these exactions. In contrast with the spiral and boomerang models, which posit that state behavior will improve, we argue that the second response of these repressive states will be to modify their repression strategies. In particular, we argue that they will use more restraints in their use of extra-judicial killing, which is easier to link to the government, and rely increasingly on forced disappearances, a violation that is more difficult to tie to the incumbent regime. Third, these states will actively prevent any evidence indicating their complicity and attempt to preserve domestic and international impunity for their agents in the face of any judicial processes that may occur seeking accountability for the deaths of the victims. Using a strategic choice approach and testing those implications with a study of the second Chechen War, we find that decision-makers responded to increased international scrutiny of their behavior by admitting some violations had taken place, but blamed the Chechen opposition, resorted increasingly on forced disappearances on a large scale and prevented domestic and international legal accountability for the disappearances of thousands of Chechens men, women and even minors.

Introduction

How are the repressive choices of decision makers influenced by domestic and international pressure from intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations? In particular, do decision makers respond strategically in their choice of repression type when faced with these pressures? We build upon recent work (Payne and Abouharb 2016), which emphasizes the substitution choices of repressive decision-makers, who are parties to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), rely increasingly on the use of forced disappearances (which we refer to as disappearances) while retreating gradually from extrajudicial killing (which we refer to as killing) in order to evade responsibility for their actions. In this manuscript, we examine how international processes identified by Payne and Abouharb (2016) manifest at the regional level. In particular, we examine how a strategic government responds to appeals to moderation from a regional intergovernmental organization, as well as domestic and international non-governmental human rights organizations and the U.S. State Department that undertake a sustained campaign of reporting and advocacy to highlight the human rights violations taking place. In this case, we focus on the strategic responses of the Russian government in response to pressure placed upon them by representatives of the Council of Europe, the key regional intergovernmental organization tasked with monitoring the implementation of the key regional human rights convention, the European Convention on Human Rights. We examine this in tandem with the strategic responses of the Russian government to a sustained monitoring and reporting by the U.S. State Department, the Russian national human rights organization Memorial and international human rights organization Human Rights Watch. Both Memorial and Human Rights Watch engaged in a sustained monitoring and advocacy campaign against the Russian government. Their research often featured heavily in the reports issued by the Council of

Europe. These human rights organizations advocated through the Council of Europe and at the United Nations for international pressure to weigh heavily on the Russian government throughout this period to improve its human rights record. By narrowing our focus we are able to draw out the causal dynamics highlighted by (Payne and Abouharb 2016) in much more detail through a strategic choice and process tracing approach.

In this analysis, we argue that these types of pressures on governments exist at the regional level too, therefore beyond the international focus in previous research (Payne and Abouharb 2016). Regional-intergovernmental organizations can also put a considerable burden on member governments by monitoring their behaviour and utilizing their power to highlight human rights violations taking place to a much wider audience. In particular, we expect that increased domestic and regional pressure will result in governments using forced disappearances as a tactic designed to maintain the benefits of previous tactics like killing, but with fewer potential negative consequences for the decision makers involved. In this sense, the choice amongst repression types is based upon the relative costs and benefits of each for the incumbent leaders involved. We argue that killing may be a relatively low-cost approach for decision makers wanting to rid themselves of individuals and groups opposed to them. There is no effort by state agents to hide the victims of killings from the public or their relatives, which sends a strong signal to others contemplating dissent against the state. In a vacuum, that would always represent their preferred option. However, the costs of utilizing this tactic increase due to greater public scrutiny by domestic observers like human rights organizations, regional observers like regional intergovernmental organisations, and non-governmental observers like human rights organisations, which undertake focused campaigns targeting a particular government. In these cases, repressive governments face a choice about whether to end their human rights violations or strategically change to different

tactics, if their mission to rid themselves of opposition is not yet complete. We argue the choice of disappearances becomes a more attractive option for decision-makers who wish to continue with the use of repression when faced with increased scrutiny, because it permits the elimination of opposition, but at a lower likelihood of facing accountability for their actions. Under these circumstances, to compensate from a slowdown in the use of extrajudicial killings, we expect to see an increase in the use of forced disappearances by agents of the state. Ultimately, if incumbent leaders face persistent scrutiny, they could tone down the use of killings to the point where disappearances become their main use of repression. Our main argument is not that political leaders suddenly abandon killings and switch their means of repression to disappearances, but that they gradually adopt a mixed strategy that takes them down the path of adapting their exactions from killings to disappearances, in the face of increased disclosure from domestic, regional and international human rights advocates. Consequently, the end result of their implementation of a mixed strategy does not invariably lead to tempering their overall use of political violence.

We utilize a strategic choice and process tracing design examining the case of the second Chechen war from 1999-2009 for evidence of this change in tactics by the Russian government. The case of Russia is an appropriate test due to the variety of human rights violations used by the Russian Army and other agents of the Russian government during this period. The case of Chechnya also provides a difficult test case of our arguments. As a powerful country, Russia is less likely than others to be swayed by domestic, regional and international pleas to use more restraints in its human rights violations. Indeed, the Russian state repeatedly denied human rights infractions and refused to agree to international monitoring of the situation in Chechnya. In addition, the Russian government also placed tight restrictions on media reporting the conflict. If despite this reluctance to admit the

existence of deliberate human rights violations agents of the Russian government, the administration of President Putin did in fact change its tactics in Chechnya as a result of mostly international pressure then this would provide strong support for our argument.

In the manuscript we focus on why government use of killing and forced disappearances may be thought of as reinforcing alternatives by repressive decision makers.¹ We discuss the choice made by governments to utilize disappearances as one that aims to limit the accountability of decision makers and their agents for the human rights violations they commit. Next we utilize a strategic choice approach to formalize the testable implications of our argument. We then examine the case of the second Chechen War to test our arguments. We close with a discussion of the broader theoretical value of our work.

Human Rights Violations as a Strategic Choice

We assume that decision makers are strategic utility maximizers in their choice of human rights violations. A strategic-choice approach posits “that actors make purposive choices, that they survey their environment, to the best of their ability, choose the strategy that best meets their subjectively defined goals” (Lake and Powell 1999: 6-7). Rather than starting with the actors as basic units of analysis, it makes the strategic problems and interactions the main focus of the enquiry. This has an important implication for our analysis. It means that the strategic-choice approach assumes that actors’ basic goals remain the same and that it tries to explain change in behaviour through an alteration of the strategic environment (Lake and Powell 1999: 19).² In the context of our study, as proverbial leopards, human right violators don’t change their spots. They mollify human rights

¹ For a discussion about the prevalence of forced disappearances see Payne and Abouharb (2016).

² Here, we short-change the richness of the strategic-choice approach, but for the purpose of our study, these explanations will suffice.

communities by adapting their actions to a changing environment, while maintaining their defined goals to silence any opposition.

From these relatively simple assumptions flows our argument that decision makers are forward-looking in their consideration of the choice of human rights violations they utilize. When the shadow of accountability grows larger and more imminent, we expect that repressive decision-makers will respond to this possibility by altering the types of repression they engage in. In particular, we expect that they will gradually change from utilizing killing to disappearances (Payne and Abouharb 2016). There are a variety of reasons as to why governments may change the types of repression they engage in. This can range from evading criminal accountability to maintaining their perceived legitimacy in the eyes of the international community to the desire for continued trade and investment (Payne and Abouharb 2016).

Our approach is different from almost the entire body of research in human rights, almost all of which either looks at aggregate human rights violations (*e.g.* Henderson 1991; Apodaca 2001; Davenport 1995, 1999; Poe et al. 1999; Richards et al. 2001; Blanton and Blanton 2007; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007; Hendrix and Wong 2013), others focus on one type of human rights violation only (*e.g.* Hollyer and Rosendorff 2011; Vreeland 2008), while a few disaggregate violations (*e.g.* Hathaway 2002; Abouharb and Cingranelli 2007; Franklin 2008; Hafner-Burton 2008). Only Payne and Abouharb (2016) have attempted to consider decision makers behaving strategically amongst repression types. Our modelling decision has a profound impact on the interpretation of the results. While most extent studies affirm that human rights violators response positively to increased scrutiny we, on the contrary, assert that state leaders adapt their strategies to better achieve their objectives.

The issues of killing and disappearances are ongoing issues. As of May 2015, The United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has transmitted a total of 54,557 cases to 105 States since its 1980 inception. The number of cases under active consideration stands at 43,563 in a total of 88 States (United Nations 2015). In comparison, estimating the number of extrajudicial killings is fraught with difficulties as the United Nations is not tasked with collecting this information (Gilgen et al. 2010). A conservative estimate taken from the Global Burden of Armed Violence survey (2015: 54) estimates that between 2007-2012 about 19,000 people died in non-conflict deaths worldwide described as “victims of legal interventions: deaths of civilians by law enforcement and state security forces during legal interventions”.

There is good reason to believe that the government choice of killings and disappearances are reinforcing alternatives, each with their advantages and drawbacks. Killing results in the death of individuals or members of groups politically opposed to the government, and disappearance in almost all cases also serves to eliminate opponents of the regime. Killings have the advantage of sending strong deterring messages to potential opponents, with the counter-effect of attracting domestic, regional and international outrage. Disappearances don't have the same direct deterrent effects but, by their ambiguity³, they can have an indirect effect on opposition groups, while stifling the efforts by human rights communities to point the fingers directly at state leaders for their exactions. Given unconstrained choices, we assume that human rights violators would always prefer to resort to extrajudicial killings and this is why they spare no effort to limit information. Once the

³ Ambiguity comes from different sources. Disappearances often leave few traces and the onus is on the human rights communities to prove that they are directly linked to incumbent leaders rather than opposition groups. With no bodies to prove otherwise, officials can also claim that disappeared individuals have joined the underground to foster the overthrow of the government. Regardless of its source, ambiguity linked to disappearances can create a climate of fear that is similar to the effect of extrajudicial killings.

“cat is out of the bag”, they adapt to a changing environment by resorting to a mixed strategy of reduced extrajudicial killings and increased forced disappearances.

For example, in 1982 Eduardo Bleier disappeared in Uruguay; he was targeted due to his alleged association with the banned Communist Party (Scovazzi & Citroni 2007: 102-104). Katombe Tshishimbi disappeared in Zaire in 1995 because of his association with a party of political opposition to President Mobutu (Scovazzi & Citroni 2007: 111-112). Jegatheeswara Sarma disappeared in Sri Lanka in 2003; he was taken because he was a suspected member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Scovazzi & Citroni 2007: 123-125). Another, Salah Saker, missing since 1994, was likely disappeared because he was a member of the banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) party in Algeria (Scovazzi & Citroni 2007: 127-129). Governments also disappear children, either through their murder or adoption, to prevent the future growth of an opposition. Disappearing both adults and children spreads fear and chills opposition to the government across large sections of society (Brysk 1994). The fear of disappearances may well make opposition members more reluctant to oppose the government because the nature of disappearances incorporates uncertainty into the dynamic between government and opposition, which does not exist to the same degree when governments utilize killing, which is overt and relatives of those involved know what has happened to their family members.

Finally, there is a good deal of evidence that governments use disappearances to evade accountability for their actions (Berman and Clark 1982; Brysk 1994: 677; Amnesty International 1993; Anderson 2006; and Scovazzi and Citroni 2007) especially in comparison to the use of killings, which are easier to prosecute (Sikkink 2011; Payne and Abouharb 2016). For example, Berman and Clark (1982) note that disappearances decrease and

sometimes completely eliminates, evidence that could be used against those responsible. While Brysk (1994: 677) comments that disappearances are a deliberate strategy used to “thwart human rights monitoring and evade accountability”. For example, the UN estimates that up to 45,000 people were disappeared during the Guatemala’s 36-year civil war. Most of these cases remain unsolved, and those responsible unpunished because of the evidentiary requirements requiring the recovery of victims (Scovazzi and Citroni 2007: 13). Disappearances are a very successful strategy to avoid prosecution and the legal penalties for killing individuals and groups opposed to the state.

Strategic Responses to Domestic & International Pressure

Previous research has documented the importance of human rights campaigns by intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations to highlight the use of state repression in an effort to curb its use (Forsythe 1985; Risse and Sikkink 1999; Donnelly 2003; Landman 2005; Hafner-Burton 2008; Murdie 2009; Sikkink 2011). For those decision-makers who are concerned about their reputations and those of their country, these campaigns increase the costs they face for not fulfilling their human rights obligations (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007). Indeed, there are considerable benefits for states to adopt human rights norms to establish their international credibility and receive the rewards of “investment, trade, aid, and positive political relationships” (Goodliffe and Hawkins 2006: 361). States that can avoid naming and shaming continue to receive inward investment (Barry, Clay & Flynn 2013). For example, Poe (2004: 26) argues that “campaigns by international non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International, and coordinated efforts between groups and foreign governments in the form of Transnational Advocacy Networks...may lead a regime to *perceive* an increase in the costs associated with

repression, thus leading them to be more moderate in their actions than they would otherwise be” [Emphasis Added].

We agree that there are real costs to repression. However, in contrast with much of the existing literature, with the exception of Payne and Abouharb (2016), we posit that some repressive governments may respond strategically to international pressure, which values apparent respect for and protection of human rights. We argue that decision makers’ international reputation and their desire to continue to receive the benefits that come with aid and inward investment will encourage decision makers that wish to continue with repression to do three things. The first is that these decision-makers will engage in cheap talk and pay ‘lip service’ to the language of human rights respect. Here our expectations are similar to those of the spiral model forwarded by Risse and Sikkink (1999), as we expect repressive governments to initially respond to pressure with denial of the issue that human rights violations exist and then admit some violations may have taken place. These governments will underemphasize the numbers of violations and obfuscate who is responsible by blaming opposition groups rather than their own agents. Because governments don’t want to be seen brazenly breaking their commitments to violating core human rights norms (Guzman 2008: 71), resulting in other states trusting them less, is why they respond in this particular way. This leads to our first hypothesis drawing upon the spiral model:

H1) Governments respond to criticism of their human rights record by denying their responsibility for any violations and blaming opposition groups instead.

It comes a point when denial is an insufficient strategy for human rights perpetrators. The second argument we make is that some government simply change the types of

violations they utilize in response to international pressure to improve their behaviour. In particular we argue that repressive decision makers also respond to regional pressure about their human rights record because such pressure may help spread information beyond the region to international bodies and other states also concerned with human rights protection. Our argument contrasts with those made by Sparr (1988) about the importance of spotlighting violations in order to reduce their frequency and Risse and Sikkink (1999) who posit that repeated engagement with human rights norms will improve human rights outcomes in violating states. We argue that strategic decision makers who think that repression is a valuable tool at their disposal, but wish to retain international legitimacy (Hafner-Burton, Tsutsui, and Meyer, 2008; Cole 2012) will continue with human rights violations but update the type of violations used in order to distance themselves from any violations taking place. In this case we expect that governments will tend to rely increasingly on disappearances over killing, until they consider operations complete to dismantle any opposition they face. Like Payne and Abouharb (2016) we also argue that decision makers utilize disappearances over killing because they are much more difficult to link to the incumbent regime. Indeed, McCormick and Mitchell (1997: 514) argue that torture and killing are more likely to incur higher external costs for governments than simply disappearing victims. This discussion leads to our second hypothesis:

H2) Repressive decision makers respond to criticism of their human rights record by increasingly utilizing disappearances over killing.

The third argument we make is that repressive decision makers will attempt to maintain domestic and international impunity for their agents for the crimes they committed. There are a variety of choices governments make to obfuscate responsibility for any

disappearances that occurred. These can range from simple denial of the events occurring, to blaming opposition groups for their occurrences, to active efforts to destroy and limit the availability of any evidence linking the state to these crimes. There is a good deal of evidence available from legal proceedings related to forced disappearance from the Human Rights Committee, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the European Court of Human Rights, and the Human Rights Chamber for Bosnia and Herzegovina that governments make considerable efforts to get rid of the bodies that provide evidence of crimes taking place (Scovazzi and Citroni 2007). Burying bodies in mass unmarked graves as the Kenyan authorities did in 2006 and 2009 is one tactic used (United Nations 2012). Scovazzi and Citroni's (2007) comprehensive recording of a variety of disappearance cases also provides numerous examples about the different methods used by governments to dispose of evidence of crimes taking place. In the case of *Masacre de Pueblo Bello v. Colombia*, pro-government paramilitaries killed and then chopped up the bodies of forty-three men including three minors and dispose of their bodies in the Sinú River or in common graves (Scovazzi & Citroni 2007: 178) to remove evidence of their crimes.

Governments can also prevent investigations by international bodies. For example, the report of the United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances (2015: 21) notes that it has requested in the past "a visit to the following countries, without having yet received a positive response: Bangladesh, Belarus, Burundi, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nepal, Nicaragua, the Philippines, the Russian Federation, South Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan and Zimbabwe". Moreover many of these requests are long standing. The Working group began requesting visits to Indonesia, Nepal, Nicaragua, The Russian

Federation since 2006 and have been made these requests afresh every year for ten years (United Nations 2015: 23-24).

Finally, the government can choose not to prosecute these crimes even if they violate criminal statutes within their countries. Our argument contrasts Sikkink's (2011), more hopeful account framed in the justice cascade. We argue that these repressive states will make efforts at both home and abroad to maintain the impunity of any individuals if identified participating in crimes, to be held accountable by a third party. For example, even in cases where court judgments were finally rendered, the ability to hold those responsible to account is very limited. In the *Masacre de Pueblo Bello v. Colombia* case, after 16 years only five of the more than sixty participants and none of the "intellectual authors" of the massacre have been sentenced for their crimes (Scovazzi & Citroni 2007: 179). Another case *Trujillo Oroza v. Bolivia*, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found against the Bolivian state in 2002, thirty years after Mr. Oroza who was extrajudicially killed in 1972. The Bolivian state made a number of attempts to prevent the mother of Mr. Oroza from discovering her son's body. She was refused an order of exhumation after locating a body that could be her son. The Commission investigating Oroza's 1972 disappearance also met government resistance. It began by claiming no ties to the case, then it appealed to the statute of limitations, and finally the government argued that it was simply too complicated and costly to locate his remains (Scovazzi & Citroni 2007: 153). This discussion leads to our third hypothesis:

H3) Repressive decision makers will attempt to maintain the impunity of their agents in the face of domestic and regional attempts to seek justice for the victims of human rights violations.

CASE STUDY: THE SECOND CHECHEN WAR 1999-2009

We follow with qualitative research to unpack and better understand the causal mechanisms under examination (Berg 2009). Our case study examines a variety of secondary source materials from books published on the issue to reports from Russian domestic and international human rights organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, to intergovernmental organizations like the Council of Europe, and government human rights reports, notably the United States Department of State Human Rights Reports.

Background

The Russian military began full-scale operations in the north Caucasus beginning the second Chechen war on September 29, 1999. The ostensible reason was to fight international terrorism and did not represent the beginning of a civil war. Initial engagements were characterised by a mix of missiles, bombs and the arrival of 120,000 troops into the region. Over the period October 1999-February 2000 the Russian military flew about 4000 sorties (Evans 2007).

The policy choice of the Russian government to prevent journalists having free access to the north Caucasus makes it difficult to assess the intentional use of extra-judicial killing and forced disappearances throughout this period. Nevertheless, the US State Department, Memorial, and Human Rights Watch reports amongst others do provide some evidence about the use and continuity of killings and disappearances as tactics throughout this period.

Much of the initial focus of human rights reporting on the conflict began and continued with a focus on the deaths of civilians due to excessive force. One of the

difficulties faced by those trying to monitor the violence was trying to determine to what extent civilians died as a bi-product of the war in comparison to their explicit extrajudicial killing by the Russian army and other pro-Russian groups.

Killings

From 2001-2008 the reports of frequent extrajudicial killings due to excessive force were a recurring feature of the annual human rights reports published by the United States Department of State. While there were some changes in the language used by the State Department, they consistently reported frequent extrajudicial killings. For example, in the reports describing 2001 and 2002 they described the situation as follows with “credible reports that the armed forces used indiscriminate force at various times in areas with significant civilian populations, resulting in numerous deaths”. (United States Department of State 2002; 2003). The report describing the situation in 2004 took a similar tone when it noted “There were credible reports of serious violations, including numerous reports of unlawful killings and of abuse of civilians by both the Government and Chechen rebels in the Chechen conflict” (United States Department of State 2005). In 2005, the report noted “the use of indiscriminate force in areas of Chechnya with significant civilian populations which resulted in numerous deaths”. (United States Department of State 2006). In the 2007 report, the US State Department wearily notes “federal and local forces continued to engage in unlawful killings as reported in previous years” (United States Department of State 2008). The last year of formal Russian operations in Chechnya was actually marked by a worsening in the frequency of killings in comparison to the previous year (United States Department of State 2009). This worsening of killings may well have indicated indifference on the part of

the Russian army to criticism of their behaviour in the knowledge that there were going to end combat operations soon. They may have sought to hit the Chechen rebels and their sympathisers particular hard before they left the country and completely turned over operations to their domestic Chechen surrogates.

Zachistka

When we examine some of the specific tactics used by the Russian military there is evidence that the nature of the war began to change in the spring of 2000 with the use of *Zachistka* or sweep operations over period 2000-2002. Mainly, the techniques were typical counter-terrorist strategies to separate civilians from rebels by encircling and sealing villages to conduct house-to-house operations (Gilligan 2010). Individuals removed from these towns and villages were sent to what were called “filtration points”. These filtration points were designed to distinguish between civilians and Chechen fighters and detain those fighters prior to trial. However, these filtration points ranged from legally sanctioned pre-detention centres to locations that were neither official nor acknowledged to be in existence like “pits in the grounds at checkpoints, a former reservoir, a quarry, factories, or fields on the outskirts of villages”. (Gilligan 2010: 58-59). These unofficial filtration points had no legal basis in Russian law (Gilligan 2010: 59).

However, it was the manner in which these operations were carried out that set them apart from a military operation that obeyed the Geneva conventions. In a clear evidence that Russians turned to a mixed strategy of killings and disappearances, Gilligan (2010) notes how “From 2000-2002 the civilian population of Chechnya those placed hors de combat by sickness or wounds, and fighters were neutralized and disempowered through summary executions, disappearances, torture, looting, and verbal abuse...the sweep operations

conducted by Russian Special Forces and privately contracted soldiers became the pervasive form of warfare over three years.” (Gilligan 2010: 50).

Indeed, despite the fact that Russian officials labeled what was taking place an “anti-terrorist operation” they were still bound both by the Russian criminal code and constitution as well as the European Convention on Human Rights, the ICCPR, and the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Gilligan 2010: 59). All these separate pieces of law ban arbitrary detention and torture.

The Russian Response to Domestic & International Criticism

There is a good deal of evidence that the Russian government responded in three specific ways to criticism of the behaviour of Russian troops in Chechnya. We examine these responses in more detail below. The first response was to simply deny responsibility for any violations taking place. Numerous officials began by simply denying there was a problem, in line with Keck and Sikkink’s (1999) expectations about the spiral model. The second was a strategic response by the Russian state and military to continued intergovernmental pressure, in particular by pressure from the Council of Europe. There was also considerable non-governmental pressure, which came from several human rights organizations. These organizations included national Russian human right organisations, like the Memorial Human Rights Center (Memorial), which released numerous human rights reports and press releases about the situation in Chechnya. There were also international organisations, like Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, which also issued numerous human rights reports and press releases. All these groups gave evidence to intergovernmental organisations like the European Council and United Nations.

When denial became nearly impossible, the Russian state gave a tacit admission that some problems existed with excessive force used by individual soldiers. The Russian army responded with specific orders, which allowed oversight of their forces during *Zachistka* operations. The orders also demanded their forces engaged in restraint when conducting the *Zachistka*. The conclusion of most researchers on this topic is that these orders constituted window dressing rather than a meaningful change in policy on behalf of the Russian state. The behaviour of soldiers changed little, and impunity remained high for any violence committed (Gilligan 2010). However, the Russians also responded to this criticism by changing the types of violations they utilized. They engaged in more frequent disappearances, not only to present a less overtly violent picture of what was taking place in Chechnya, but also to make any human rights violations that took place much more difficult to link to the Russian state.

The third change, which further protected the Russian state and its agents from accountability for human rights violations, was to decentralise the fight to and amongst Chechens themselves. This change has been described as Chechenization of the war. The federal forces empowered local pro-Russian elites to continue with the use of violence, creating a situation where Chechen was now fighting Chechen. A move that not only had a corrosive effect on societal cohesion, but also placed an additional layer of impunity between any human rights violations that took place and direct responsibility by the Russian state. By empowering local Chechens to continue with much of the violence from 2003 onwards Russian policy makers were able to further protect themselves and their agents from accountability for the continued use of disappearances and other human rights violations that continue through to 2016 (Walker 2016; US State Department 2016), despite the fact

that the Russian military announced an official end to its counter-terrorism operations in 2008.

Denial

There is a good deal of evidence that the Russian government responded to criticism of the behaviour of Russian troops in Chechnya by simply responsibility for any violations taking place. Numerous officials began responded to questions by simply denying there was a problem and blaming opposition groups instead. This is in line with Keck and Sikkink's (1999) work where they note that officials typically begin by denying the existence of a problem when faced with questions and critiques of the behaviour of their agents.

The initial reports about the behaviour of the Russian government forces centered on the use of torture at one filtration point called "Chernokozovo." For example, the then deputy minister of justice colonel General Yuri Kalinin concluded "The accusation that the detained are being tortured and beaten is just sheer lies and slander." (Quoted in Gilligan 2010: 62). In a similar tone, the BBC (2000) revealed a Russian Foreign ministry's statement, responding to James Rubin from the US State Department who called for a thorough investigation of allegations of human rights violations taking place in Chechnya, saying that "the tone and content of Mr. Rubin's remarks were unacceptable" and that he was conniving in what it described as "information terrorism". The Memorial human rights center, which pursued these claims with the prosecutor of the Chechen Republic, who is responsible for monitoring the situation and in prisons and detention units in Chechnya, noted his response that "all the reports on violations and misconduct in Chernokozovo Detention unit are just unsubstantiated rumours" (Memorial 2000). This provides a good deal of support for our

first hypothesis. The behaviour of the Russian troops in Chechnya had quickly attracted attention. The second response, which we explore below, represented a shift in tactics from public killings to the expanded use of disappearances (our second hypothesis), associated with the privatisation the killing of anyone remotely deemed to be in opposition to the Russian state (our third hypothesis).

Strategic Acknowledgement

There is evidence that the Russian military was sensitive to public outcry against the behaviour of their soldiers during the *Zachistka*. They responded with two orders, one in May 2001 and another in March 2002 to reign in the impunity of their forces. However, it had little effect on changing the behaviour of the troops involved in the sweeps (Gilligan 2010: 65 , 67). Gilligan (2010: 70) describes torture as Russian state policy in Chechnya. It that was not only organised but also encouraged by the military elite, perhaps most tellingly that it was “an unexceptional feature of the armed conflict”. Nevertheless, troops remained systematically immune for their behaviour Gilligan (2010: 75-76). In contrast with the hopeful expectations of those who argue that criticism improves state behaviour (Keck and Sikkink 1999), we argue that the Russian government responded strategically to these criticisms by shifting incrementally from killings to disappearances instead.

There is a stark contrast between initial sweeps, which were characterized by the extrajudicial killing of civilians and fighters in the villages of Alkhan-Iurt, Staropromyslovskii and Novye Aldy. Importantly, this pattern of public executions was replaced by disappearances (Gilligan 2010: 63). The change in tactics was as a result of international pressure. The Russian government faced criticism from the Council of Europe during 2002

and 2003 for their behaviour in Chechnya (Council of Europe 2002; Gilligan 2010). A number of reports made by the Council of Europe during 2002 and 2003 highlighted the situation in Chechnya. One report by the Monitoring Department of the Directorate of Strategic Planning within the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2002) presented to the assembled ministers summarised Human Rights Watch, *Médecins Sans Frontières* and other accounts of widespread human rights violations by the Russian government. In another publication, the Council of Europe Human Rights bulletin (2002a: 24-25) noted that it is its human rights delegation fourth visit to Chechnya since the beginning of the conflict in 1999. The publication described how it discussed the treatment of prisoners detained for screening and the implementation of order 46 which was designed to reinforce federal control over the operations and with both the Prosecutor of the Chechen republic and other senior civilians and military prosecutors (Council of Europe Human Rights bulletin 2002a: 24-25). Another document noted the response of the Committee of Ministers (Council of Europe 2002b) and highlighted that “the Russian prosecutor’s office has not undertaken systematic, credible and exhaustive criminal prosecutions of those members of the federal forces implicated in war crimes (such as mass killings), but also in other human rights violations (ranging from extortion over ill-treatment to rape, looting and murder)”. We argue that Russians responded strategically to the focus on public killing in this document and others by changing their tactics to more frequent use of forced disappearances. Gilligan in her detailed account of the changing nature of the Russian operations in Chechnya notes (2010:77-78)

The visual hallmarks of the second Chechen war manifested in the *Zachistka* began to diminish in the summer of 2003 "under growing pressure from the council of Europe the Russian government was forced to ease the large-scale sweep operations in an effort to rein in impunity. The worst appeared to be over. But this picture of growing calm was highly misleading. Large-scale sweep operations were gradually replaced by an increasing number of targeted sweeps, nighttime abductions and disappearances" Masked men started to arrive in groups ranging from 6-

30. The Russian special forces "entered private homes, pulled men and women, civilians and those placed hors de combat, from their beds in the middle of the night and took them away. "

In an extraordinary interview Gilligan (2010: 77-78) describes how one military intelligence officer discussed the night operations as "surgical" and that "normal people are not disappearing in Chechnya. It's the scum who are disappearing, who should be destroyed and cleaned out." And yet civilians, as noted above, were affected by these operations. Gilligan (2010: 78) describes how there were numerous cases of bodies of the disappeared turning up "near the sites of detainment or in graves across the region with clear signs of violent death-hands bound, ears cut off, multiple skull fractures, bruised and broken fingers". Direct linkage to the Russian forces committing these atrocities was difficult. Nevertheless, the chilling signal sent by all these dead and mutilated individuals was very clear: anyone thought to support the Chechen rebels would simply be killed without any recourse to due process, a trial, evidence, or the right of those accused to have their presumption of innocence.

Alongside this change from the use of killing to disappearances, Gilligan (2010: 63) notes that detention, torture, and extortion, looting, also became some of the main features of these sweeps. At the same time, while conditions of the well-known detention centres improved, violence moved to temporary filtration points, a boarding school, and military headquarters to limit the possibility of evidence emerging of these practices.

Other observers of the conflict note the change in the use of forced disappearances over this period. The US State Department (USSD) noted during 1999, at the beginning of the second Chechen war, the frequent killing of civilians through excessive force by the

Russian military (United States Department of State 2000). At the same time, they note that the Russians responded by deflecting criticism in responding that “Government officials [...] are employing “high precision” tactics against separatist and terrorist targets in Chechnya.” Russians responded to denunciation from Western press organisations, that they had attacked an open-air market killing at least sixty people and injuring 200, by saying an attack had taken place, but it was conducted by special forces rather than from the air or through heavy artillery (United States Department of State 2000), which would make it more indiscriminate. The report also notes how the Russian government had restricted journalists access to the area, another way to limit accountability of their agents in Chechnya. In contrast, the USSD adds that in 1999 “there were no reports of government involvement in cases of politically motivated disappearances”. (United States Department of State 2000). Gilligan (2010: 78) notes that, while disappearances had been part of the second Chechen war, they had changed in character and scope over the 1999-2005 period. The limited evidence for the early disappearances in 1999 and 2000 indicates that these were mostly random in their nature, with little intelligence backing up these decisions. A number of groups bemoaned their limited access the region during the 1999-2001 period (Human Rights Watch 2001; Council of Europe 2002).

In 2000, refusal of Russian government access to reporters to monitor the conflict was evident in the inability of the US State Department (2001) to report the numbers of those extra-judicially killed by the Russian government was limited to specific accounts given by Human Rights Watch to at least 38 people, but probably higher with reports that the federal forces “killed numerous detainees,” who were alleged Chechen fighters. At the same time, in 2000 we see the first reports of forced disappearances taking place (United States Department of State 2001). When these disappearances began, relatives reported the

disappearances of their family members to the Russian President's Special Representative for Human Rights in Chechnya. By the end of 2000, his office had received complaints of 853 disappearances (United States Department of State 2001). As the war progressed, the willingness of the general public to report these disappearances dropped dramatically. Members of the public feared retaliation by the Russian military and pro-Russian Chechen forces (Human Rights Watch 2005; Gilligan 2010). They also realised that the Russian state was making no substantive effort to find their relatives and to prosecute the perpetrators of these crimes (Human Rights Watch 2005; Gilligan 2010).

The Memorial Human Rights Center estimated that between 700-1000 people remained unaccounted for in 2001. The Russian government's own Special Representative for Human Rights in Chechnya noted that by September 2001 they had a total of 959 complaints of disappearances (United States Department of State 2002; 2003). The Special Representatives office noted that 401 persons had been located, 18 were dead with criminal investigations being carried out in 234 of the cases, and searches for missing persons in 324 other cases. In contrast, in March of 2001 Human Rights Watch (2001) labelled what was taking place in Chechnya a 'dirty war' with at least 59 people disappearing whilst they were in Russian custody, although they thought the true picture was far worse with many more disappearances.

From 2003 onwards, the frequency of forced disappearances increases. For example, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that Russian forces had "disappeared" at least 26 people between late December 2002 and late February 2003. This was the highest rate of "disappearances" documented by HRW since 1999 (US State Department 2003). There were at least 472 new cases of disappearances occurring during 2003 year, according to Memorial.

The NGO estimated that the frequency of cases was at least three times higher as they were only able to report from 25-20 percent of Chechnya's disappearances (US State Department 2003). Of the 472, 269 disappeared without a trace, 48 were later found dead, and 155 were released after a ransom had been paid. Memorial also noted variation in the frequency of disappearances within the year, with dramatic declines in the frequency of disappearances before the March constitutional referendum and the October presidential elections (US State Department 2003). This may have been because of increased international interest in the events taking place in Chechnya with occurrence of elections and an attempt by the Russian state to give a veneer of normality.

In 2004, the USSD describes reports of “extensive government involvement in politically motivated disappearances”. (US State Department 2005). The reports also note the Chechenization (Gilligan 2010) of the conflict where they describe how “during the year, federal forces and pro-Moscow Chechen forces engaged in human rights violations, including torture, summary executions, disappearances, and arbitrary detentions”. They also go on to describe how the *Zachistka* changed with fewer human rights violations taking place during the raids, but the disappearances of individuals continuing unabated. During the year, Memorial reported that 396 people had disappeared down from 395 registered in 2003 in the 25 to 30 percent of the Chechen territory to which they had access (US State Department 2005). 189 were freed after relatives paid a ransom, 173 disappeared without a trace, and 24 bodies showing signs of torture or violent death were recovered. Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin estimated that 1,700 people were kidnapped throughout Chechnya between January and November, which appeared consistent with Memorial's figures (US State Department 2005). The Council of Europe Resolution 1403 in 2004

recounted the disappearances of people at the hand of the security forces and, extraordinarily for a formal governmental document, used very strong language to condemn the continued uses of forced disappearances. The Council stated “such methods are totally unacceptable and should be stamped out by the federal and local authorities” (Council of Europe 2004). Nevertheless, the wording used suggests that the disappearances are a problem of lax control of their forced by both the Russian government and Chechen authorities, rather than a deliberate policy choice. The wording of the statement may have been to provide the Russian government with room to manoeuvre and the ability to say that, in response, it had stamped out these behaviours, even if they had been government policy in the first place.

The difficulty in accurately assessing the numbers of forced disappearances remained in 2005. The US State department noted there were no reliable estimates of the numbers detained, abducted or disappeared. Both Chechen rebels, criminals seeking ransom, as well as federal and pro-Moscow Chechen forces were engaged in forced disappearances. Memorial reported that in the 25 to 30 percent of Chechnya to which its monitors had access, 316 persons were abducted during the year, of whom 151 were freed or ransomed, 23 were found dead, 15 were thought to be in detention, and 127 disappeared. Memorial reported that 448 persons were abducted in 2004 and has estimated that 3 to 5 thousand have gone missing in Chechnya since 1999 (US State Department 2005). Russian reporter Anna Politovskaya (2005), noted that early 2005 “has been marked by a record high number of abductions of locals whose mutilated bodies are later thrown out in village outskirts, cleaning up operations, round-ups, [and] robberies”. Human Rights Watch (2005) also reported an extraordinary unwillingness of people to talk to them about which human rights violations had happened to them and their families, especially their unwillingness to make a

formal complaint about any forced disappearances that had happened to them for fear of reprisals. Thus it is difficult to say whether the actual number of disappearances had gone down during 2005, and not simply the reporting of them.

The continued drop in forced disappearances was noted in 2006 where “according to Memorial, 184 people had been abducted, 91 were later freed many after which a bribe had been paid, 11 were killed, 19 were thought to be in detention, and 63 disappeared”. The US State Department (2007) notes that Memorial attributed “at least part of this decline to a climate of fear in which individuals were afraid to report abductions”. The use of intimidation especially by pro-Russian Chechen forces led many families to change their behaviour in comparison to earlier in the conflict where people reported the disappearances of their loved ones to the authorities. By 2005, people were even cowed into submission to simply not have the disappearance recorded at all (Gilligan 2010).

The State Department Human Rights report notes that during 2008 there were “numerous” reports of politically motivated disappearances in the Northern Caucasuses (United States Department of State 2009). The report further noted that the situation had worsened in comparison to the year before with increases in disappearances, killings and other abuses. The report describes accounts that both federal and local security forces engaged in excessive use of force and engaged in human rights abuses including “torture, summary executions, disappearances and arbitrary detentions”. The US State Department (2009) describes what it labels abductions continuing to happen in the North Caucasus. The NGO memorial reported that during 2008 there were 90 kidnappings in Chechnya. In general, this is thought to be only a portion of that numbers of disappearances that have taken place with most people too scared to report the abduction for fear of reprisals.

Perhaps most startling about the report from 2008 was that these violations continued after the Russian government formally ended its operations during the year.

In 2009, the State Department (2010) continued to report frequent politically motivated forced disappearances taking place in the North Caucasus, with heavy involvement of President Kadyrov's forces in their occurrences. There were at least 34 people who were abducted during this period that remained unaccounted for, although as with previous years, most human rights organizations thought that these numbers significantly underreported the true figures with heavy intimidation of family members, whose relatives have disappeared, to prevent them from reporting these crimes. The harassment, intimidation, and sometimes, violent death of both reporters and human rights monitors trying to work in Chechnya continues to the present (Walker 2016).

While exact information about the behaviour of the Russian army is difficult to discover, there seems a good deal of evidence of a strategic response by the Russian state and military to criticism of the behaviour and at least a partial change in the tactics and their willingness to use disappearances on an industrial scale during the 2003-2009 period. Next, we assess the extent to which the Russian government maintained impunity for the actions of their agents and by implication the choices made by the policy-makers themselves.

How Russian Governments Maintained the Impunity of Their Agents

There is a good deal of evidence which we explore below that supports hypothesis three that repressive decision-makers will attempt to maintain the impunity of their agents in the face of domestic and international attempts to seek justice for the victims of human rights violations. The Russian state utilized a number of different practices to maintain the

impunity of both principals and their agents. The first appears to have been how many of these operations, especially the *Zachistka* were carried out.

The way troops conducted operations enabled the first layer of impunity. Gilligan (2010: 51) notes that “According to civilian testimony, the military servicemen and the policemen entering the houses during the sweep operations rarely identified their rank, brigade, or affiliation; their faces were frequently covered by masks or blackened with soot to conceal their identity. The military vehicles normally had no designated registration numbers or the registration plates were deliberately covered in mud or painted over, making it almost impossible to determine who committed the atrocities.” In addition to how these troops conducted their operations, there were also various layers of bureaucratic immunity by different arms of the Russian state to repel attempts by Chechen civilians, domestic, and international human rights organisations and intergovernmental organisations to make the Russian army and its surrogates accountable for their actions.

The 2004 US State Department Report (2005) noted the impunity of President Kadyrov son’s forces. His son’s forces were responsible for many kidnappings that took place in Chechnya. The Memorial human rights center pursued many of these cases with the Chechen Prosecutor General's office, but “proceedings were dropped in four fifths of the cases due to the fact that no suspects could be identified”. The report also notes how new mass graves and dumping grounds were discovered throughout the year, but that “There were no reports by year's end that the [Russian] Government had initiated any criminal cases related to the mass grave discoveries” (US State Department Report 2005).

The USSD in 2008 continues to describe how the authorities in the North Caucasus “reportedly acted with impunity”. Indeed, the Russian federal government further distanced

itself from any human rights abuses taking place when on April 16, 2008, it announced a formal end to counterterrorist operations in Chechnya, along with plans to reduce federal forces from 50,000 to 25,000. However, the report notes that “instances of violence increased.” The State Department notes the increased role of Chechen President Kadyrov’s forces in abductions, either solely or in co-operation with federal forces (US State Department 2009). With human rights groups describing that these forces were “frequently suspected of conducting disappearances and abductions, including those of family members of rebel commanders and fighters”.

The continued obstinacy of the Russian federal government to protect its agents was noted by both Human Rights Watch (2008), which noted the government had failed to act on any of the rulings made by the European Court of Human Rights to investigate specific human rights violations in Chechnya. The court made 115 rulings that held the Russian government responsible for both serious human rights violations and failure to investigate them. The Human Rights Watch report examined 33 of these cases and found that the government had not “brought a single perpetrator to justice, even in cases where the court named the person allegedly responsible”. (United States State Department 2009). The State Department (2009) reports how in the first four months of 2008 the ECHR found the Russian government responsible for 25 disappearances and presumed death of those disappeared and also of inhuman treatment of the families involved by refusing to provide information about their fate. In December of 2008, the ECHR found the Russian government responsible for the disappearance of another Chechen, Ruslan Kasumov, in 2003. It awarded his family 37,000 euros (\$53,000). The Russian government refused to comply with its decision, even though it is a Council of Europe member and bound by the European Court of Human Rights to uphold its decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

In this analysis we present information demonstrating that repressive policymakers are sensitive to criticism from regional intergovernmental organisations, as well as particular local and international human rights NGOs, which undertake a sustained campaign of highlighting and disseminating information about these human rights violations. In contrast with more hopeful accounts about how the dissemination of information about human rights violations may curb their use (Keck and Sikkink 1999; Sikkink 2011), our findings suggest that at least some decision-makers will respond to pressure by changing the types of violations their agents engage in. Evidence remains difficult to gather, but from what we can glean, the Russian government in the second Chechen War responded to criticism of their tactics by increasing the use of forced disappearances. This change in tactics enabled them to deny that their agents were responsible for these crimes and instead blame it on opposition groups.

This research adds to the work by Payne and Abouharb (2016) by indicating that strategic actions by repressive governments take place in response to regional pressure, not just international pressure. Moreover, it strikes another cautionary note about the ability of intergovernmental regimes to restrain the use of all human rights violations. Instead, what our analysis reveals is the strategic response of some decision makers to continue violating rights, but do so in a way that is very difficult to prosecute and to hold decision makers accountable for their actions. Our work also addresses some of the puzzling findings of previous research (Hafner-Burton 2007) on how governments respond to naming and shaming, with some repressing more and others repressing less. Our research also complements other research that proffers different explanations for the inconsistent effects

of naming and shaming (e.g. Franklin 2008, Hendrix & Wong 2013, Murdie 2009). Our findings indicate governments may both strategically decide to rely less on extrajudicial killing due to increased criticism of their behaviour and more frequently engage in forced disappearances instead. Future research may examine other regional human rights bodies and whether governments targeted by these bodies responded strategically by changing the types of repression they utilize. Research may also try to unpick if and why some governments respond to criticism strategically whereas others may not. As our case study demonstrates, some governments adapt strategically to mounting pressures from human rights advocates, but we have not yet demonstrated that they all do. If they don't all adapt, under which contingencies do they choose to bow down to international pressure or, on the contrary, respond strategically by using mixed strategies to achieve the same objectives? We believe that the use of a game-theoretic framework will prove helpful in answering that question.

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