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NOTHING PERSONAL

Fatima Tlisova was brutally beaten for her uncompromising journalism on the North Caucasus. She recounts the tactics used to intimidate her

I never aimed to be political, nor did I ever ask for protection in any sense of the word. I did not get a single penny despite working 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I only aimed to be a reporter according to my own personal understanding of the word. But, as it turned out, my unambiguous efforts were enough for me to find myself under the most severe pressure from all angles. What had I ever done for such a number of authority figures and military people to start considering me their personal enemy? I only ever wrote what was true and sometimes I also assisted journalists arriving in the Caucasus. That was all. That was my crime. But I was dealing with a country that had an 'individually developed type of democracy' as characterised by the president, where journalists were sentenced to death for such crimes. I did not learn about the various methods of pressure used on the press through reading books or from a human rights organisation; I learned about them through personal experience. Throughout my ten years of working in the Caucasus, I got to experience every one of them.

The authorities have many ways of 'working' on you. Sometimes you do not even realise what is going on, especially not at the very start. I do not

XML Template (2008) [15.2.2008–4:49pm] [35–47]
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suggest that all journalists receive this treatment. There may be those who will never in their life come into conflict with the Special Forces. But I also fail to understand how the authorities select who should be kept on a short lead, so to speak. For me, they first got involved in my professional career as soon as I moved from the local press to Moscow, as soon as I became a Caucasus correspondent for the democratic *Obshchaya Gazeta*.

How was it done? A 'friend' would suddenly appear and would, out of friendliness, offer to obtain certain information for you. Being a journalist you get very excited at the prospect of gaining access to 'secret' documents before any of your colleagues do. I'm trying to remember more details about this person, but I can't. He was too discreet and unmemorable a figure for me to have any clear recollection of him. This type of 'friendship' would last until you realise that you are only getting as much information as they are prepared to divulge, not a word more. Soon you are made aware of the fact that if you wish to maintain this 'friendship' and remain privileged to receive such information, you must never publish anything of a serious nature without your friend's approval. Of course, the maintenance of this friendship also depends on your character. Many journalists keep up this relationship throughout their entire professional career. The Special Forces periodically feed these people denunciatory information on public figures and the 'friend' always instructs the journalist in question as to who can and cannot be criticised, to what extent an investigation may continue and so on.

Sometimes I wish I could turn back the clock. I would be using them instead of them using me. But then I realise that this would not have been possible. Your 'friendship' is evaluated according to how satisfied they are with you. If they are not happy – and if you try to use them they will certainly not be – the amicable relation soon turns sour. It is a fact that the narcotics police, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), the FSB, the courts and the prosecutor general's office cannot stand each other to the point where they are prepared to divulge confidential and compromising information on one another. During my final and most difficult months I still tried to use this fact, knowing that the only thing that could possibly restrain them would be the fear of being exposed. The situation is, incidentally, repeated in the various government ministries. When you do manage to use their internal divisions to your own advantage, you feel very proud and clever. But when you suddenly 'get out of hand', your 'friends' will warn you not to do it again and, if you do, their attitude towards you changes before you even have time to blink. The 'work' on you reaches its final stage and, in my case, the 'friendship'

View of Nalchik, North Caucasus
Credit: Solomonov Andrey/RIA Novosti

quickly graduated to this ultimate step. The final stage proved to be a very sick development in the full sense of the word.

In one of my reports from a Caucasus border camp, to which I was accompanied by an FSB major, I described the soldiers' behaviour as it really was. No one paid any attention to me or seemed embarrassed by my presence; they were all convinced that I would write what was necessary and expected. I wrote about the drunken soldiers, generals with Chechen child-prostitutes, a captain who was shooting cows (for amusement) and a colonel who was practising knife throwing, aiming at potatoes placed on top of the head of an extremely pale-looking soldier. It did not take more than one day after my article had been published before I was badly beaten up. It had been done to me before while I was working, but I wouldn't describe the first experience as being the work of professionals. It happened during the peak of violent ethnic clashes between Karachai and Circassia – relating to the fight for the presidential seat. As a fresh young journalist with less than a year's experience, I loudly declared my Circassian sympathies. I considered such an action to be part of professional journalism. Unsurprisingly, some

XML Template (2008) [15.2.2008–4:50pm] [35–47]
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Karachai youths decided to teach me a lesson. As we were reporting from the Karachai region my team was surrounded by some 20 angry young men; everyone of us was badly beaten and we were all severely traumatised following this experience. Despite being the only female in my group, I still received the same treatment as my colleagues. I can recall how they hit us in the face and kicked us in the stomach with their boots. The film camera was smashed to pieces and the film itself was destroyed.

The second attack was different from the one just described as it was directed only and exclusively at me. It had been well planned in advance and it was of a made-to-order nature. It happened on my 32nd birthday. We had had a few guests over, but only my closest friends: a refugee family from Chechnya. They had a small child with them so they left quite early. I walked them out and then went to fetch my laundry that had been hung up to dry in the yard. As I walked back through the entrance to my block of flats, I suddenly sensed a movement and the cellar door was unexpectedly flung open. Someone's very strong hands grabbed me and pulled me aside. Two big men, whose faces I could not distinguish in the half-light, began to beat me with extreme force on the head, in my ribs and my stomach, without uttering a single word or making any unnecessary movements. Curiously enough, they seemed to realise that I would not make a sound because the door to my flat was only a few yards away and, if I did scream, my children, who were sitting peacefully watching TV, would be the first ones to hear me. I could not risk them coming running out and getting attacked too. So I kept quiet and I let them beat me, without putting up any resistance. At the time, I had no idea how long it lasted. Now I would estimate it to have been about seven minutes. I remember thinking: 'There has got to be an end to this. It will be over soon.' I also realised that these men were not intent on killing me or even hitting me with full force. The two of them were obviously in good shape. One blow from either of them would have been enough to kill me on the spot. It is strange how the fury and insult – not to mention contempt for those who had to use force to deal with me – after such an event is stronger than the pain itself. It is difficult to explain this feeling with words: I suppose disgust rather than contempt. I remember recalling the faces of my 'friends' and wondering which one of them had ordered the attack. When the two men decided that I had had enough, one of them placed me up against the wall – as if I would stay there – and said quietly: 'It's nothing personal.' They left as silently as they had appeared.

XML Template (2008) [15.2.2008–4:50pm] [35–47]
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My children had not even noticed that I had been gone. They were still sitting watching television when I walked in. It was such a strange sensation to have the calmness of the flat, my children in front of the TV, blended with the happiness of knowing that this had nothing to do with them. I hid from my children in the bathroom and phoned my sister who said she would come over immediately. I felt terribly sick and every time I turned my head I threw up. I thought that my face would be a complete mess, but when I looked in the mirror I was surprised to see that there was not a single bruise on my face, hands or feet; this was indeed the work of professionals. My skull felt like a gigantic octopus, all soft and spongy, but my hair covered the injuries. My sister quickly arrived and I left for the hospital in the very same taxi that she had arrived in. It was established that I had severe concussion: two broken ribs, damage to my right kidney and internal tissue. I needed urgent surgery. In addition to it all, I reacted badly to the general anaesthetic and had to remain in hospital for more than a month. But I did survive and I returned from this experience a whole new person.

It was obvious that this had been a warning rather than an act of vengeance. It was a lesson that definitely taught me a lot, although the opposite to that of my attackers' intentions. You see, up until then I had been a naïve and well-meaning journalist, but I left the hospital with a firm realisation and understanding of what real journalism was and that I wanted to pursue it.

There was an investigation into my case. High-ranking officials, judges and policemen were the heroes of the show. Numerous court hearings, various types of check-ups, interrogations and other such things were all deemed necessary in order for this 'rebellious' journalist to 'come to her senses'. These were the hopeful and reckless times during the rise of President Yeltsin. Back then, Russia still had newspapers that would publish just about anything. In the light of today's situation, this was definitely freedom. Nevertheless, the attitude of defence and law agencies remained solid and their methods strictly communist.

I experienced genuinely dangerous situations, as well as outright funny ones, during this period. An FSB officer in the Karachayevo-Circassian region was one of the dangers. After one of my articles was published on the subject of how he had abducted the children of local merchants and demanded ransom for them, set fire to the houses of the 'disobedient', raped a young girl and still escaped justice, he began following my children when they were walking home from school. Once he even tried to lure them into his car, saying that I had asked him to pick them up and take them to my office. My children – nine and seven years of age – grew suspicious of this

man who spoke to them in Russian. You see, the Russian language was very rare in this small Circassian village. They got frightened and ran to the nearest house from where they were escorted home. From that day on, my father would always walk my children to and from school. Such a thing had never been necessary before. It was a small village where everyone knew each other, it was very safe and the school was only five minutes walk from the house. Judging by my children's description of the man, I realised that it had to be the FSB officer.

A couple of days later he turned up at my office with an enormous bouquet of roses, a bottle of champagne and chocolates. His behaviour had been so convincing that the receptionist had not even thought twice about letting him in. I did not notice his presence when he first came up to my desk, because I was busy working on the next issue of our newspaper. Maga T, a Chechen refugee who was working for us as a graphic designer, was sitting at my desk. 'Fatima?' the officer said.

XML Template (2008) [15.2.2008–4:50pm] [35–47]
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Death of a militant in Nalchik, 2005
Credit: Heidi Bradner/Panos

'Yes?' I answered. I only noticed him at this point. I remember Maga screaming, the bouquet on the floor and the silhouette of the major's leather cloak as he ran away. My colleague, Maga, had thankfully noticed that he had been holding a gun behind the flowers and said that if I had been on my own in the office he would have shot me. Following the publication of my article, the major was released from service for a short period of time. As far as I know, he is still serving in the army and has risen in the ranks to colonel.

Back then, I was completely convinced that publicity would only interfere with my work. If you complained about the pressure, you were sure to find yourself under such persistent attention that you would think you were the star of a TV soap rather than a journalist. For someone in my position, the thought of that was unbearable. So therefore the fights with 'friends' all took place away from the public eye. This tactic means you work like a lone wolf, counting only on your own strength and your actual friends. I kept up this tactic for quite a long time. I worked with a sense of victory,

XML Template (2008) [15.2.2008–4:50pm] [35–47]
{TANDF_REV}RIOC/RIOC_I_37_01/RIOC_A_288443.3d (RIOC) [Revised Proof]

thinking that what they were doing to me was the most that they could do. Today, this conviction seems rather naïve.

Things started to get more serious when I returned from Prague, where I had been working for just over a year on Radio Svoboda. Returning to Russia with a collection of 'government enemy' interviews was a bit reckless, but at the same time also very interesting. Working in the press office at Radio Svoboda, I started to turn into a shrewish bureaucrat; I was genuinely missing my real work at home.

The Caucasus is always alive, pulsating, varied and fascinating. It is not possible to explain to an outsider how a person from the Caucasus feels, unless it is someone who has lived there for some time. In that case they might be able to grasp the subtle flavours of the warm love and the pride that fills the heart of every Caucasian. There is Nalchik with its breezy mountain winds. It feels free and yet captivating at the same time. Caucasians can argue for hours over which capital is the best: Grozny in Chechnya (this was the capital up until the war), Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia and Nalchik in Kabardino-Balkaria. I adore these arguments, though I think that Nalchik is the best city in the world. If you have ever dreamt something that made you think 'May this never happen for as long as I live,' then you will probably understand what I mean. This was exactly what happened all around me and to me in Nalchik, in this town that I love as much as I hate.

It would have been interesting to take a look at the FSB's and MVD's hour-long 'film clips' of my life in Nalchik. I would have loved to rummage through the records of my old text messages, which they stole from my mobile phone. It is so very strange this feeling of being under constant surveillance. Sometimes I find it irritating, other times it is just a bit like teasing. Sometimes you play a cat-and-mouse game with your followers and on some occasions you just start hurling insults at them or drop unexpectedly to the floor, which always causes them to run off in panic. You learn to distinguish the MVD car from the FSB one and gradually you also start recognising your stalkers' faces, even their moods and characteristics. With some of them you develop a mutual understanding – they are just doing their job – whereas with others it is a case of pure loathing. It is usually only during the first year of being followed that the situation seems impossible. Then you get used to it and it becomes part of your daily routine.

What does it mean to be living under surveillance? For instance, you come home after two days of absence and find that the kettle is warm, the computer is on and there are cigarette stumps on the toilet floor. But nobody has been at home nor does anyone in your household smoke. Or the Moscow

XML Template (2008) [15.2.2008–4:50pm] [35–47]
{TANDF_REV}RIOC/RIOC_I_37_01/RIOC_A_288443.3d (RIOC) [Revised Proof]

editor of *Novaya Gazeta* calls you on the house phone and says: 'I tried calling you only a few moments ago and a man answered the phone saying, ''Major ... How can I help?'' I got confused and asked if I could speak with Fatima upon which he immediately hung up. Is everything ok with you?'

Today, my mobile – +79287001633 – is switched off and silent; it is as if I have lost a close friend

Everything was fine with me, which was more than could be said about the major. I knew with absolute certainty that such a person was working for the FSB, because he had called me in for interrogation. Technical blunders of this kind kept happening. On the 23 February, the Russian army has a celebration in honour of their profession, but it is more of an excuse to get drunk. On this very day, my landline suddenly stopped working – a complete disaster since I have a dial-up Internet connection. As an editor-in-chief I have to be able to access the Internet at all times. I phoned the service line from my mobile. There were no faults with my line and they told me to put the other phone down. I only have one phone in the house, so they sent out a technician who arrived some three hours later. He checked everything from the entrance hall to my flat, but could not find anything wrong. After five minutes of fiddling about he informed me that he could not help me and that somewhere there was another phone connected to my landline with the receiver off the hook; this was what was causing the problem. My landline did not work for over 24 hours. From time to time I picked up the receiver in the hope that it would work. On a few occasions I heard a voice on the other end, then snoring. I even shouted through the receiver that those idiots should hang up. My phone started working as normal on the following day.

There were also incidents with my mobile phone. One day, someone started phoning my mobile from a withheld number; it happened six or seven times a day and the person on the other end never said a word. Three days later a woman's voice asked me to pass the phone to Aslan. I told her that she had dialled the wrong number. She read out my telephone number to me and

XML Template (2008) [15.2.2008–4:50pm] [35–47]
{TANDF_REV}RIOC/RIOC_I_37_01/RIOC_A_288443.3d (RIOC) [Revised Proof]

said: 'My dear, this is my husband's number and I would like to know what you are doing at his office and what right you think you have to be unashamedly answering his mobile phone when I call.' She started to get hysterical and called me an FSB whore. It was only afterwards that I realised she must have been the wife of whoever it was who had bugged my mobile phone. I'm not sure what happened with Aslan and his jealous wife, but I'm sure he was no less reprimanded.

For the last two months I was not even being followed by people from Nalchik. They had been replaced by Chechens. It's a cynical idea to use representatives of the very same people who have suffered at their hands to carry out the more severe punishments. My friend, who has close contacts in the FSB, told me that I had to leave: things were getting too serious with the authorities assigning Chechens to take care of me and it meant they were planning to kill me. I was at first shocked. The shock was not so much caused by the realisation that someone somewhere had decided to kill me. It was more because they had contracted Chechens to do it. The Chechens did not even try to be discreet; they were young men with stylish hairdos and expensive clothes. I took one look at them and thought that they had probably been sent out to fight in the first war as children. Deprived of their roots, they had been turned into universal killers. The Russians had already done this back in Ermolov's day (late 18th-early 19th century). It seems some things never change.

Today my mobile – +79287001633 – is switched off and silent; it is as if I have lost a close friend. For years this number was more important for a great number of people than 03 – the Russian emergency number – or 911. I often did not know of these people's existence until they phoned me. Day or night – it did not matter.

The number was used by both friends and strangers who called to say that so and so had been arrested, tortured to death, killed, shut up in their own house and then assaulted, someone else had had their entire medical history confiscated, another one their children poisoned, an old man had been refused his medication, doctors were not getting paid, a town's light, water and heating systems had been switched off, a house had caved in, a village surrounded by troops. It is impossible to account for all the violence that the Caucasus has been, and still is, going through. My parents sometimes also telephoned for the very same reason; they too had had their house searched and had been called in for questioning.

XML Template (2008) [15.2.2008–4:50pm] [35–47]
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I feel guilty about my children, as do I about my parents. They have had a hard time because of me. Family pressure is always the worst. My mother was always crying, saying that I was prepared to sacrifice all of them for work and that I wasn't there for my own children the way I was for other people. My father was always wary, always prepared to receive bad news about his daughter and always wanting to know in which direction I was going so that they at least would know where to look for me in case . . .

I remember the constant fear in my children's eyes and the permanent feeling of guilt that I could not stay with them, that I could not just give it all up and start living a quiet and peaceful life, not seeing nor hearing anything. I often brought my children over to my parents before going off to work, but if I was going somewhere calm I would take them with me, so that I at least would get to spend some time with them. My children were living under strict rules in Nalchik: they were not allowed to use the elevator, not allowed to go out to the main entrance if none of the neighbours was there, not allowed to open the front door in case someone was hiding behind it, nor were they were allowed to talk to strangers and so on.

On the day when the war came to Nalchik, I did not come home until late in the evening. My son told me that all the other parents had come running for their children as soon as the shooting had started and that he and his sister had stayed there thinking I would come for them. In the end, their teacher had told them to go home on their own. My son said that they had been wondering if I was still alive until they heard my voice on television. He did not say anything for a while, but then told me that seeing that programme on TV had made him feel ill. My daughter told me about how they had listened to a broadcast by NTV: there was my voice, then the sound of shooting and explosions, then the sound of someone screaming something about a sniper and then I went silent for a moment. My daughter said my long-term silence had made Shamil go very pale and nearly fall off his chair. But then they heard my voice again and they all calmed down. It's not customary in the Caucasus to praise your own children. But my children truly are the best gift the Almighty has ever given me. I do feel a lot of guilt about them, but there isn't much I can do about that. On that day I could not bring myself to leave the warmth of the house. My mother later asked me how I could have done what I did. Shots were being fired right outside the school and I had not even come to get my own children, nor had I given a thought to how frightened they must have been walking home all on their own. 'You have a heart of stone, you're not a mother!' said my own mother. And she was probably right. But again, there was not much I could do about it.

XML Template (2008) [15.2.2008–4:50pm] [35–47]
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Heading home late in the evening on that very same day, I had to walk for nearly 20 kilometres as public transport was not running. I walked along the streets of my beautiful Nalchik, past the dead bodies of young, beautiful lads. I could not quite comprehend that they would be left lying there for yet another night, and then another one and another one. These boys would never be buried.

This happened in October 2005. By then I had been abducted, burned with cigarettes, threatened, subjected to yet more searches, had people waiting in cars outside my window and accompanied by a flock of sharks. I had got used to the isolation, the constant refusal from the Foreign Ministry when applying for permission to work for foreign publications, the public insults in the press and the screams of the MVD press secretary in the Kabardino-Balkaria region, Marina Kyasova, aiming at my chin (because she couldn't reach any higher even in those barbaric heels of hers) with her accusing finger and long red nails. I got used to it, I was not even offended any more. I got used to old friends avoiding me, discreetly crossing the street if they happened to come across me and who then telephoned from a public phone to excuse themselves and asking me not to call them by name. 'Your phone is probably bugged. Don't be offended, but if I talk to you they will call me in for questioning again and demand that I tell them about everything that we talked about, if you asked about such and such or if you suddenly remembered someone's name and so on. I don't want to have to go through this again and feel like an informer.'

After October, my life wasn't the same; my old life was from now on only visible from the other side of the river and all I could do was to look across the water at the woman on the other side, envying terribly all of her problems and worries. ❐

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