

**GENDERED NARRATIVES OF “BLACK WIDOW”
TERRORISM IN RUSSIA’S NORTHERN CAUCASUS
REGION**

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Abstract

The issue of terrorism within the Russian Federation primarily concerns the separatist movement of rebels in the North Caucasus region of the country, including Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan. A high percentage of terrorist attacks carried out on Russian soil are perpetrated by female suicide bombers; commonly referred to in Russian and international media reporting as “black widows”. Public dialogue on these now famed “black widows” is based on different understandings of gender as it relates to violence, terrorism and security. These perceptions are founded in the inherent cultural and societal beliefs about gender roles. My central argument is that public narratives used to describe and explain “black widows” reinforce governmental goals to legitimize “counter-terrorism” activities via a highly gendered form of propaganda. Through usage of qualitative discourse analysis of media coverage on the black widows, I unpack the debates over female terrorists in Russian versus western media and demonstrate how they legitimize varying policy agendas by making them “thinkable”. More specifically, the Russian Federation and the West contain competing discourses over black widows—supporting Russia’s hard line (take no prisoners, show no mercy) approach, and the West’s more sympathetic use of pity positions, respectively.

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Introduction

The topic of conflict and terrorism in Russia's Northern Caucasus region is one that is accompanied by many emotion-inducing aspects, such as: Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, historical precedence of previous ethnic conflicts, stereotypes and ethno-religious beliefs which serve to exacerbate the ongoing separatist movement in the region. One of the more well known, popularized, and reported upon issues concerning specifically the terrorist activities of organizations in Chechnya is the phenomenon of female suicide bombers, "shakhidki" or "black widows" as they are commonly called by Russian and international journalists. The way in which these "black widows" have been popularized and scrutinized by both Russian and international media is interesting, as it is highly gendered in both, yet there are differences in the way women (as active agents) of terrorism are portrayed and framed within the different dialogues. The distance between these positions on the "black widows" comes through in the use of specific language.

Given the significant uptick of terrorist attacks carried out on Russian soil by Chechen rebels in the last decade, both the domestic Russian and international media have begun to pay closer attention to Russia's volatile North Caucasus. Adding fuel to the fire and certainly more scrutiny to the issue of terrorism within Russia is the aspect of the Winter Olympic Games, which are to be held in Sochi in 2014. The Olympic site is one that comes with inherent concerns over a terrorist threat, and has already had an influence in media reporting as a means of "upping the ante" in Russia's fight against terrorism and the Chechen threat. The Moscow metro bombings of 2010, widely believed to be the worst terror attack on Russian soil since 2004, served to both heighten the scrutiny on "black widows" as they were the claimed perpetrators and also act as a catalyst for stronger Kremlin rhetoric in their

own “war against terror” as a means to show their country and the world that the terrorist threat is under control.¹

Within the field of international relations, the gendered framing of black widows is relevant to the ongoing discussion of women in militarized situations and those females who participate as active components of terrorist organizations and attacks. This feeds into the broader question of the ways in which gendered understandings across cultures play a role in permitting or enslaving economic and social actions of governments. Sexuality can have a relevant and important influence on the policies of states with regard to many different issues, but this thesis will investigate the particular impact of gender in militarized conflict as it relates to governmental policies on terrorism and terrorist threats. I seek to provide a contribution to existing work done by academic scholars within the broader discipline of feminist international relations and will specifically focus on women and terrorism, as seen through the gendered worldviews of both Russia and the West. The central research question is founded in the ongoing public discourses on “black widows”, primarily in the reporting after terrorist attacks have been carried out. I will investigate the ongoing debates over black widows, what drives these debates, asking whether there are differences in the discourse utilized in the western versus the Russian media.

From a policy perspective, understanding the heavily loaded dialogue on black widows is important as it can shed light onto the goals and specific policies enacted by governments relating to terrorism and security. In this case, I will explore the connection between the use of gendered discourse in media and the government of the Russian Federation’s policies on the North Caucasus and their own acknowledgement of the “war on terror” aimed at Chechen rebels and associated black widow terrorists.

¹ Luke Harding, “Moscow Metro Bombs Kill Dozens,” *The Guardian*, March 29, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/29/moscow-metro-bombs-explosions-terror>

Literature Review

There is much scholarly work done on the subject of gender and international relations as it relates to militarized conflict that explores females as “combatants” of a coerced nature in areas of conflict. “Girls who have joined or have been abducted into militaries often aren't used by the men designing the force's division of labor as weapon-carrying soldiers; instead, girls and young women are deployed as cooks, porters, and forced 'wives' of male combatants.”² However, in Chechnya, women combatants in the majority of cases seem to be independently and rationally deciding to enter the conflict as fighters and sometimes as suicide bombers in terrorist attacks. The high rates of female militants in the North Caucasus deems the region a particularly ripe one for the study of gender and terrorism, as it relates to perceived norms of femininity and masculinity. Since the year 2000, “Chechen female terrorists have been involved in twenty-two of the twenty-seven suicide attacks (81 percent of the total number) attributed to Chechen rebels. There were a total of 110 bombers in the period reviewed (the last ten years), forty-seven of whom were women (43 percent of the total).”³

One strand of scholarly work on gender and conflict when looking at black widows asks the question of “why” women could or would decide to become militarized or in any way turn violent, as it theoretically runs opposite to a woman’s biological nature. The prevalent belief concerning black widows and their reasons for joining militant organizations revolves around the aspect of revenge. Too often, the idea is that women are solely motivated by vengeance of their fathers, brothers or sons. This is formulated by the fact that revenge is a common component of the traditional cultural beliefs in the Northern Caucasus

² Cynthia Enloe, *'Gender' Is Not Enough: The Need for a Feminist Consciousness*, International Affairs, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Vol. 80, No. 1, (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 95-97.

³ Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, *Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists*, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, Institute for National Security Studies, (Tel Aviv, Institute for National Security Studies, 2006).

(strictly adhered to by men as well) through social acts such as honor killings, etc.

Traditionally, Chechens live by an ethos of revenge that mandates that when a loved one is harmed or killed, and it is the responsibility of the family members to locate the evildoer and exact due recompense. This ideology of revenge is strictly codified and does not normally spread beyond seeking out the originator of the harm or his close family and requiting his evil deed. Recently, due to widespread and longstanding war, traumatization and bereavement, the importation of a terrorist mentality is changing: revenge is becoming generalized in the minds of many.⁴ However, this understanding is flawed, as there are many reasons besides revenge that a woman can be motivated to become active in terrorist or extremist organizations, whether they be psychological in nature (due to rape, or otherwise), economic (extreme poverty) or social (lack of rights for women, mass disappearances of Chechens, etc.).

Existing journalistic coverage of black widows and gender tends to incorrectly identify women as “kidnapped, raped, and/or drugged to encourage them to take part in terror activities” yet there is little evidence of this, and much in defense of the contrary.⁵ Most Chechen women and girls who have been interviewed by researchers are highly loyal to the cause of Chechen independence, and truly believe that becoming a martyr through suicide is a noble cause, which will assist the plight of their fellow Chechens against the Russian Federation in the fight for freedom.

While scholars are eager to study the reasons for this high level (81% of all terrorist attacks in Russia since 2000 have had women participants) of female terrorism in the Northern Caucasus- the focal areas of interest tend to revolve around the personal traumas, injustices, human rights violations, religious influences and sway of terrorist organizations’

⁴ Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, *Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists*.

⁵ Ibid.

networking and coercion. While these are certainly interesting aspects of study, none of them look at the other side- how female militants are viewed by the public and why those views are held- more importantly, what frames the opinions about these women? Why are they seen differently and often more stigmatized than male terrorists?

As it is relevant to the research question to understand the existing work done more broadly on gender and conflict and not merely on the Northern Caucasus as a specific region, this section will explore the larger picture of feminism and conflict. The overall attention being focused on violence perpetrated by women has recently been growing in the field of International Relations and documented by scholars such as Cynthia Enloe. Enloe and others note that women's violence garners much more attention than that of men, due to the inherent belief that violence is not a natural inclination or appropriate behavior for a female. As such, women's violence falls outside the lines of what it is typically understood by society at large to be legitimate or even understandable forms of resistance by women.⁶

The uptick in scholarly study of gender and conflict parallels a tendency among many leading policymakers, governments and international organizations to treat gender issues with priority. This led to growing ties between the policy world and scholarly work. The main questions on the issue of women's violence remain associated with the identity of being a woman- whether violence betrays a woman's femininity (showing it's weakness) or, instead opening up a new window on the strengths of feminism. This boils down to the study of women's violence and the related effects on global politics; how this is connected with the broader international perceptions of female characteristics and the role of women in the global political realm. As the number of women joining militant organizations and turning to violence increases worldwide, the investigation of this subject and the larger repercussions

⁶ Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters and Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*, (London, Zed Books Ltd., 2007), 2.

both politically and theoretically on the gender norms is one of paramount importance.⁷

Feminists' work is grounded in contemporary feminist theoretical debates due to the fact that all of them use gender as a central category of analysis, and most could neither consider themselves liberal or realist.⁸ This questioning of the field and how it should be studied culminated in what is now referred to as the "third debate", which came about in the 1980's and outlined a call for new ways to think about and study IR. Asserting that we had moved from a world of states to a global community, R. B. J. Walker claimed that the third debate represented a fundamental divide that went well beyond methodological issues because it arose more from what scholars thought they were studying than from disagreements as to how to study it.⁹ "While there is no necessary connection between feminist approaches and post-positivism, there is a strong resonance for a variety of reasons: including a commitment of epistemological pluralism as well as certain ontological sensitivities with a preference for hermeneutic, historically based, humanistic and philosophical traditions of knowledge accumulation, other than those based on the natural sciences, feminist theorists are often skeptical of empiricist methodologies that claim neutrality of facts."¹⁰

Unfortunately, attempts to integrate women into the field of IR feed into the wrong belief that they are not there in the first place. As Cynthia Enloe and fellow feminist scholars mention: women (as well as other marginalized people) are "highly involved in world politics, but existing power structures, institutionalized in the split between the public and

⁷ Ibid, 4.

⁸ Ibid, 5.

⁹ R.B.J. Walker, "History and Structure in the Theory of International Relations." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 18, no. 2 (1989), 166.

¹⁰ J. Ann Tickner, "You Just Don't Understand: Troubled Engagements between Feminists and IR Theorists", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (December, 1997), 611-632.

private spheres and what counts as “important,” keep them from being heard.”¹¹ An important job at hand for the field of feminist IR is to not only question the existing theoretical bases of mainstream IR theory, but also to expand the dimensions of study and stretch the boundaries of thought, which can reveal the already present (but not yet brought to light) role of gender and challenge the conventional norms of IR theory.¹²

In applying feminist IR and gender to the field, a critical analysis should investigate how beliefs about “correct” behavior, roles and relationships of the sexes are made legitimate and lasting by international institutions. Contemporary power relations rely on the sustained existence of the “male” and “female” gender roles and the appropriate behavior associated with them. This claim also feeds into the question of how women act in, react to, feel about and relate to war. As this thesis will explore, feminist IR theory can be applied to the ways in which the military and governments “use, and alter, prevailing discourses about gender to their own ends. Work in this area demonstrates a coincidence of militarist and misogynist rhetoric in mobilizing both men and women to perform various wartime functions.”¹³

Research Question

The strong reactions of the public, media, and the military to violent women’s actions lend credence to the continued study of feminism and international relations and politics. These reactions provide insight into the existing frames and narratives on violent women in society and reveal the cultural and social understandings of women’s violence in global politics. The research question asks how social understandings of black widows are

¹¹ Cynthia Enloe, “Margins, Silences, and Bottom Rungs: How to Overcome the Underestimation of Power in the Study of International Relations.” In *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, ed. Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski, (Cambridge, 1996), 186–88.

¹² Ibid, 35.

¹³ Sandra Whitworth, *Feminism and International Relations: Towards a Political Economy of Gender in Interstate and Non-Governmental Institutions* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 26.

gendered. Through the analysis of discourse, the puzzle over differences between the western and Russian media, that may have not been previously apparent, come through. Answering this question and clarifying the puzzle over media depiction is important, as it serves to explain the policy goals of different governments and highlight the connection between media discourse and political action.

Argument

My main argument is that the prevailing narratives in the Russian media on black widows are directly linked with the policy goals of the Kremlin on counter-terrorism in the North Caucasus. By analyzing both domestic Russian and international media, I will show the links between gender stereotype and terrorism and highlight how the black widows have become an important symbol for both the Russian and Western societies in their own wars against terror. However, the analysis will show the distinct differences in narratives, and highlight the negative metaphors and tropes used to characterize black widows in Russia to legitimize government operations against them and their kinsfolk in the Caucasus region. These negative gendered narratives found in the Russian media highlight the dangerous, animalistic and demonic ways of black widows that render them “inhuman” and justified targets of state-condoned violence. On the other hand, western discourse constructs black widows as helpless victims of their environment, which implicitly critiques the Russian handling of the North Caucasus and gives credence to the U.S.’s wary stance of “friendly, but cautious” towards Russia.

This research will shed light on the usage of sexuality-based metaphors as a form of propaganda and a tool to harness public support for “counter-terrorist” operations carried out within Russia’s North Caucasus. While much pre-existing scholarly work has focused on the prevalence of social narratives on gender stereotyping as it relates to women’s violence, this thesis will tackle a more specific ideal of female terrorists in Chechnya and their effects on

government policies associated with ongoing violent conflict in Russia. “As Ramzan Kadyrov, vice premier of the Russian-backed Chechen government said in his interview to Chechen TV on May 11, 2005, “Chechen women are the most dangerous for national security because they have carried out the most risky operations. If the current trend continues, Chechen female bombers will continue to be a grave threat to Russian national security”.¹⁴ This broadly recognized high-level threat of the black widows gives credence to the analysis of how they are depicted in the Russian press and in what ways their characterization through narratives is used to strengthen policy agendas.

In this theoretical vein, an analysis of the discourse of gendered power structures, social institutions, media outlets, and hierarchical values of a “national security state” such as the Russian Federation will be carried out. “Feminists generally share the view of other critical scholars that culture and identity and interpretive “bottom up” modes of analysis are crucial for understanding security issues and that emancipatory visions of security must get beyond statist frameworks. They differ, however, in that they adopt gender as a central category of analysis for understanding how unequal social structures, particularly gender hierarchies, negatively impact the security of individuals and groups.”¹⁵

The specific use of metaphors in dialogue and their meanings for political purposes will be explored further in the first chapter of this thesis, but overall, I will argue that discursive constructions can make possible or “thinkable” the different policy approaches of governments, in this case the construction of the black widows helps to reinforce the Kremlin’s policies on the North Caucasus. For example, as will be explored later in my thesis, the narrative of “whore” commonly used to describe black widows makes them seem worthless, dirty and willing to do anything for validation or a cheap thrill (validating

¹⁴ Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, *Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists*.

¹⁵ J. Ann Tickner, *Gendering International Politics: Issues and Approaches in a Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 48.

government policies against them) and making them “thinkable” to the public.

Research Design

The research seeks to investigate the underlying gender-based narratives on black widows in the Russian and Western media and how they influence associated policies on the Northern Caucasus and ongoing violent conflict between the region and the Russian Federation. This represents a niche that will compare and contrast the two medias and their discourse on black widows through the overarching narratives of gender and how these discourses permit policy positions and decisions regarding Chechnya in the Kremlin and western governments, respectively. These opinions may be driven by societal norms, or they may be specifically tweaked by elites to achieve political or ideological goals.

I will utilize a method of qualitative and interpretive discourse analysis focusing on the prevailing narratives and metaphors constructed around female suicide bombers, or black widows. Discourses are systems of signification in which the language is structured in terms of binary oppositions that create power relations. These discourses serve to define subjects that are dually authorized to speak and act and they also establish known practices by these subjects (which therefore makes certain actions legitimate and others illegitimate).¹⁶

Discourses can also grow a public audience for these actors, garnering a social space that comes to be organized and controlled. This system essentially endorses a specific meaning of accepted protocol, excluding others. Finally, discourse analysis leads us toward research on dominating or hegemonic language and how it is connected to the implementation and legitimation of policies, practices and even beliefs. More fundamentally, discourse produces what comes to be understood as “common sense.” Discourse analysis helps to explain how specific language works and when such discourses might be rendered unstable. This practice

¹⁶ J. Ann Tickner, *Gendering International Politics: Issues and Approaches in a Post-Cold War Era*, Columbia University Press, 2001, New York, NY, 145.

allows for the study of subjugated knowledge or alternative discourses that may have been silenced in the process.¹⁷

Through intensive data analysis of mainstream media, from both Russian and Western news organizations, existing narratives on black widows will be unearthed.

Data collection will be carried out through the usage of Lexis-Nexis, internet and open source searches for official statements and press releases and/or articles wherein there is useful language to analyze on the discourse of black widows, female suicide bombers or insurgents directly related to the ongoing separatist movement and operations in Russia's Northern Caucasus.

In order to test the theory that attitudes towards the North Caucasus and black widows in general are at least partly swayed by public debates over sexuality and gender roles, I will use qualitative content analysis of terrorist attacks and events carried out by Chechen rebels covered heavily by international media outlets. This will afford me insight into the socially constructed image of female terrorists (black widows) in the North Caucasus and assess any connections between the constructed norm and how it (directly or indirectly) influences the policies of governments as they relate to fighting terrorism. "Additionally, qualitative content analysis is useful for exploring the meanings underlying physical messages as well as the inferences drawn from them in the data."¹⁸

The time period I will limit research to for this thesis will be the last decade, this includes articles from 2002-2012 because this is the period in which media sources heavily discussed terrorism in Chechnya and black widows, as there were many attacks perpetrated by rebels in the last ten years, sparking media attention. The number of articles analyzed relating to black widow terror attacks from the western press was thirty seven, and the

¹⁷ Ibid, 145

¹⁸ Zhang Yan and Barbara M. Wildemuth, "Qualitative Analysis of Content"
http://www.ils.unc.edu/~yanz/Content_analysis.pdf.

selected articles from Russian press on the attacks was twenty nine, a total number of sixty six news articles, not including additional excerpts from governmental statements selected from other articles.

I test my theory by collecting data in a manner that establishes the predominant “frames” or narratives about the actions of black widows and how their agency to commit them is perceived and why. These narratives will highlight how Chechen female insurgents are portrayed as vengeful monsters, helpless, yet singularly determined and not considered part of the political processes. The gendered frames within the discourse will show the denial of women’s agency in carrying out violence and identify how labels bestowed upon them serve to blame “femininity” for their actions while simultaneously justifying the masculine state’s attacks on women in the region (policy-wise), and strengthening the justification of the patriarchal military operations in the region. I will show these narratives through the finding of distinct key words, and the usage of metaphor in the public discourse on black widows in international media.

I will seek evidence of the linkage between the socially constructed framing of black widows along lines of sex, and its relation to policies on terrorism in the west and Russia. The differences in perception and reporting on black widows from a western vs. Russian viewpoint will be explored through the analysis of specific terrorist events and the subsequent reporting done on them from both angles. All analyzed events received a high level of international media attention and they are the following:

- The 2002 Moscow Theatre Hostage Crisis
- The 2004 Beslan School Hostage Crisis
- The 2010 Moscow Metro Bombings

To ensure the fair analysis between western and Russian medias (as fair as one can be with the consideration of Russian state controlled media), I will use mainstream news

agencies in the data set and refrain from using particularly left or right wing leaning newspapers, as the results could be skewed. The discourses reflected in newspapers bring about the creation of images that explain the world we live in and assist with the building of foundations for self-identification. They represent the basis of a social life network by establishing particular meanings, and as such, have an important role in producing, maintaining and representing ideas, values and beliefs about the nation and its associated policies.¹⁹

To find specific articles relevant to the issue of black widows as they relate to Russia and terrorist activities, I searched for significant key words that would be mentioned in the news articles, such as: Chechnya, black widows, suicide bombers, terrorism and Russia, Shadhiki, and female terrorists. Through the use of inductive reasoning via constant content comparisons, there emerge patterns of specific language usage, which designate themes in the discourse and categories in which to organize the ways in which black widows are framed.

My unit of analysis for the data is the nature of the key words used to describe black widows, whether they take a more empathetic approach of attempting to understand the plight of female suicide bombers, or whether they are considered to be “inhuman”, “monsters” or otherwise characterized in a negative light as the enemy. This, more simply, designates a characterization of the black widows based on the language used to describe them in media. Through the employment of content analysis, the designation of keywords was developed before and during the analysis of data, which then fed into categories of “positive” and “negative” groups based on the meanings the key words used in the metaphors hold.

The “positive” connotation category of characterization often is accompanied by an interest in understanding the motives of black widows, and investigating the environment in

¹⁹ Zaller R. John, *The Nature and Origin of Mass Opinion*, (London, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 306.

which they are brought up in and atrocities they may have lived through. The sexual aspect is construed as one of pity and shock that a woman could be capable of suicide attacks against innocent civilians, and is regularly married up with the idea that: these women are taken advantage of by men around them, whether that may be a religious leader, husband, or other family member. Age is also an aspect often highlighted in the positive category, underscoring the young ages (and therefore youthful innocence) of women who are engaging in terrorist operations, and becoming black widows.

The negative category, on the other hand, puts emphasis on the inhuman values of black widows and oftentimes construes them as desperate and hopeless “monsters” that have forsaken their womanly duties of motherhood and their associated “softer sex” personality characteristics. The negative narrative tends to the discredit of any cause the women may be pursuing, and their individual agency in following through with their attacks.

There are limitations to the methodology utilized in this thesis, as the discourse is analyzed in a qualitative manner. The findings are somewhat based on personal opinion and interpretation, which is subjective and subject to dispute.

Chapter Division

The first chapter will explore the intricacies of the use of metaphors in public discourse, and outline how they wield a sort of subconscious power over people’s personal beliefs through a linkage with another, more inherent, social aspect- in effect, making something “thinkable”. I will then move into the construction of propaganda and how it can shape or make possible governmental decisions. Chapter two will give a breakdown of the most high profile terror attacks in Russia (carried out by claimed Chechen rebels) and an introduction to the language commonly seen in media after the attacks. Chapter three will then delve into the deeper connotations for these evident “frames” in the discourse on black widows and highlight the differences between the west and Russia concerning language used,

and why (internal or external factors?), help make thinkable the specific counter-terrorism policies put forth by both the Kremlin and western governments.

Chapter 1: Metaphors, a Hidden Power in Public Discourse

The goal of understanding versus explanation becomes paramount when analyzing gendered narratives, as these existing structures are socially constructed and therefore fluid, highly variable and shrouded in shades of grey.²⁰ Previous scholars have worked to understand this construction through the decryption of metaphor usage in public discourse. Through the promotion of certain metaphors and the discrediting of others, participants in debates can achieve what is called “interpretive dominance”, or more plainly, the blanket acceptance of one’s own characterization of a particular issue or event.²¹

1.1 Constructing Propaganda with Hyperbole

When competing interpretations of an issue exist, and the stakes or repercussions of these debates is high, there can be significant policy changes attached to the prevailing interpretation, or that which has become the commonly held belief on an issue. Metaphors can often carry heavy inherent meanings, and are considered loaded with the power to reach the public and sway general opinions on issues based on the attached meanings of the metaphors used to describe the issue or event. Metaphors used in the public discourse on an issue also have the ability to influence how political communities or governments define their goals.²² "Political language and arguments- in sum, political rhetoric- create political consciousness and define political settings, create national identity and stimulate people to

²⁰ Ibid, 5.

²¹ Roland Paris, “Kosovo and the Metaphor War”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 117, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), 423-450.

²² Ibid, 5

act and give sense and purpose to these actions.”²³ According to scholar of political communication, George Lakoff, “metaphors limit what we notice, highlight what we do see, and provide part of the inferential structure that we reason with.”²⁴ Metaphors can also have the power to bring about rational and/or irrational emotional associations, which allow politicians to use them in a way that “threatens or reassures people so as to encourage them to be supportive or quiescent.”²⁵ Through the careful selection of metaphors and hyperbole, political and governmental actors are able to orchestrate subliminal messages catering to the particular “sensitivities, prejudices, and emotional associations” of their publics and maintain a veneer of respectability whilst accomplishing their goals.²⁶ Internal personal emotions: memories, feelings, fears, hopes and dreams are mental properties that are construed in the minds of individuals and are essentially ‘private in character’ that serve as a link and filter between a person’s individual worldview and the actual external environment.²⁷

It is important to note that individual beliefs are not possible without taking into consideration the socially constituted shared language, or more simply how these beliefs are expressed in the public dialogue. It is in this manner (public discourse) that beliefs find intelligible meaning.²⁸ Therefore, the discourse on black widows, like any other issue, is a set of socio-cultural resources used by society to build explanations of things they see in the world. Through the analysis of metaphors or narratives used to tell a story, it exposes the ways in which a particular discourse- that of black widows- both “constrains and enables the

²³ Ibid, 5

²⁴ George Lakoff, "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf" in Martin Pfitz, ed., *Thirty Years of Linguistic Evolution* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1992), 481.

²⁵ Francis A. Beer and Christ'l de Landtsheer, "Metaphorical Meaning and Political Power", *Metaphorical World Politics*, (Michigan State University Press, 2004).

²⁶ Peter Fysh and Jim Wolfreys, *The Politics of Racism in France* (London, Macmillan, 1998).

²⁷ Richard Little, "Belief Systems in the Social Sciences", in Richard Little and Steve Smith (eds), *Belief Systems and International Relations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 45.

²⁸ Ibid, 371.

particular understandings” of the North Caucasus, it’s women, the separatist movement, and Russia- bringing about the relationship between them.²⁹

1.2 The Policy Implications

Belief systems have a powerful impact on state action, and whether they are construed as images or otherwise, they provide the “lenses through which information concerning the physical and social environment is received.”³⁰ Using the previously mentioned individual perceptions, policymakers can mold information that is incoming to them into their existing images and theories put forth. The fact that the external world is always interpreted by the public’s belief systems is used by leaders, governments and decision makers. In this vein, certain widespread fundamental beliefs, such as those pertaining to gender roles and sexuality, can be used in a metaphorical context to send messages about other issues relating directly to policy.

Discourse has significant ideological effects, such as propping up or discrediting specific groups, interests or activities- and this fact is almost always “implicated in the production and reproduction of power relations and policymaking.”³¹ In the realm of Russian policy on terrorism emanating from the North Caucasus and Kremlin statecraft, the knowledge produced serves to bolster the power of the state and legitimize certain policies enacted with regard to counter-terrorism operations in the region. Essentially, this begs the question of how specific meanings and metaphors are produced with regard to the black widows and how they attach interpretive dispositions about femininity to the issue, in a manner that reinforces the patriarchal, strongman policies of the Kremlin in the North Caucasus. Through the subsequent analysis of international media on black widows, it is

²⁹ Ibid, 373.

³⁰ Ole R. Holsti, “Cognitive Dynamics and Images of the Enemy- Dulles and Russia”, in David J. Finlay, Ole R. Holsti, and Richard R. Fagan (eds), *Enemies in Politics*, (Chicago, Rand-McNally & Company, 1967), 29.

³¹ Ibid, 377.

demonstrated that state actions are, at least in part, a discursive construction of these norms and in part the material interests of the state enacting policies.

1.3 A Woman Did What?!

“Women are capturing hostages, engaging in suicide bombings, hijacking airplanes, and abusing prisoners. Moreover, they are doing so on the front pages of the *New York Times* (2004) and other major international newspapers.”³² The traditional and socially accepted image of women includes perceptions of characteristics such as maternal love, peaceful, and emotional. In many ways, violent women shatter the accepted roles of femininity, which shuns the idea that women are capable of or prone to the same mistakes, violence or excessiveness that men are.

Women’s violence is usually referred to in terms of gender, as they are not *supposed* to be violent.³³ Women are supposed to be against war and violence and fight for the protection of innocence- this expectation is often taken advantage of by states who put forth a “gendered protection racket, which marginalizes women while appearing to foreground their interests.”³⁴ Women’s victimization in war is not an uncommon stereotype, and is factually based; as usually the effects of war are in fact gender-oppressive, yet violent women as well as innocents may be among those oppressed by war.

Despite the reality that women are just as capable of carrying out terrorist activities and committing violence to achieve political ends or other more personal agendas, the existing public reactions to individual incidents involving violent women do not match up. There is a particular attention paid to the characterization of violent women, in this case, black widows, that highlights them as special cases that go against the norm, challenge their

³² Sjoberg and Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics*, 1.

³³ *Ibid*, 2.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

individual agency and reinforce gender stereotypes and subordination.³⁵

Some pre-existing narratives already researched with regard to black widows are organized as the following: mothers, monsters and whores. These narratives will also be relevant in the subsequent analysis of discourse on them in the next chapters. Firstly, the mother narrative underscores the need for a woman to belong, nurture and be loyal to men and also can cover cases where motherhood has somehow “gone awry” for a woman. This narrative is often referred to in the discourse as it applies to the aspect of vengeful black widows that have lost their children or husbands as casualties of Russian operations in the North Caucasus. Secondly, the monster narrative characterizes women as irrational and eradicates any relevant ideological motivation or ownership of their actions. Often, this usage involves a denouncement of black widows as mentally insane or unstable- even goes as far as blaming mind altering drugs and brainwashing as cited reasons for their actions. This monstrous narrative also gives the impression that black widows are neither: women, or even humans, anymore. Thirdly, the whore narrative describes women’s sexuality as out of control in the extreme and focuses on an erotic dysfunction founded in an incapability to please men or a backlash to women who feel they are men’s sexual possessions.³⁶

These prevalent narratives serve to create an “us versus them” mentality, and color violent black widows as the enemy “others”. They successfully portray black widows as freaks of nature, or a result of faulty biology. This tactic serves to protect the societal values of femininity: fragility and purity, while discrediting the others as “bad women” who do not represent the majority or the norm. By making this separation, it remains possible to still blame femininity for the transgressions of the “bad women” without damaging the prevailing socially accepted role of women. This distinction points out the heavily stereotyped and stylized narratives, frames and metaphors used to describe black widows; and as a result

³⁵ Ibid, 5.

³⁶ Ibid, 17.

provides a basis to explore and recognize the highly gendered nature of discourse on violent women and more specifically, Russia's black widows.

Using these existing narratives, I will show in the subsequent chapters how they are employed in the discourse on black widows and demonstrate the connections and variations of their framing. My goal is to go beyond the above-mentioned three predominant narratives in a manner that extrapolates on their meanings and the implications they have on specific propaganda concerning counter-terrorism operations in the North Caucasus. The next chapters will outline and highlight the language used (from both a western and Russian perspective) to describe black widows, and then analyze the reasoning for why such frames are used and how they can have the power to legitimize certain policies enacted by governments. I will explain in more detail the origination of the term "black widow", and then systematically outline the terrorist attacks perpetrated by them in the last decade and look at the media fallout following.

Chapter 2: “Black Widows”- Russia’s Scariest Enemy

Given the fact that over fifty percent of the terrorist attacks carried out domestically against Russian citizens are perpetrated by Chechen, Inush or Abkhaz women, it is no surprise that especially over the last decade, the notoriety of the so-called “black widows” has skyrocketed.³⁷ This notoriety has almost certainly spread fear throughout Russia, as the public has watched countless terrorist attacks carried out in their homeland over the last ten years. Not only have the attacks become larger in scale, they are growing more frequent and daring. The rising unpredictability and lethality (airplanes, metro, train, airport bombings and two hostage crises involving hundreds of civilians), reinforce the fears of the Russian population.

What makes the black widows particularly “scary” is not only the image of a Muslim woman dressed in all black, veiled, strapped with bombs, but the absolute cult of fear surrounding them put forth by the Russian government, media, and individual policymakers. “Russia is becoming obsessed with these women - and with good reason. Almost every suicide bombing connected to Chechnya in the past two years has involved women.”³⁸ In this quote from 2004, a western newspaper recognizes the fear as a borderline obsession in Russia and correctly asks the question many ask themselves about the black widows: are they martyrs or victims? Famous Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya (murdered through extremely suspicious means in Chechnya in 2006), offered her opinions on public opinion and the black widows: “People say those women are not human,” says Politkovskaya, of *Novaya Gazeta*. Admired for her reporting on Chechnya and nicknamed “Russia’s Michael

³⁷ Simon Schuster, ““Black Widows” Recruited for Terrorism in Russia”, *Time Magazine*, April 7, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1978178,00.html>, (last access May 23, 2012).

³⁸ “The Women with Death at their Fingertips- Martyrs or Victims?” *The Scotsman*, September 5, 2004, <http://www.scotsman.com/news/international/the-women-with-death-at-their-fingertips-martyrs-or-victims-1-1400308>, (last access May 23, 2012).

Moore” by Western observers— she served as a negotiator during the Dubrovka siege. “They say that either there is something wrong with them or they are deficient in other ways. They are just as human as we are, and they’re driven to terrible decisions by the conditions of their life.”³⁹ This “inhuman” quality given to the black widows only serves to exacerbate the fear of them in the Russian public, giving them a distinct flavor as a monstrous enemy who is neither a woman, nor human. “Mysterious and faceless, ‘black widows’ are both exotic and terrifying. While some descriptions are subtle in presenting them as monsters, other accounts blatantly refer to the women as zombies.”⁴⁰ The zombie depiction is fully evident in the following quote from Akhmad Kadyrov, the previous President of Chechnya and current Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov’s father: “the female bombers ‘are not fundamentalists but *zombies* who have simply been hypnotized and stuffed full of drugs’ by their radical Islamist handlers.”⁴¹

“The 2010 Moscow metro attack also served to strike fresh fear into Muscovites and refocused attention on the female suicide bombers willing to martyr themselves in the name of Islamist Jihad or holy war.”⁴² Part of the success of the black widows’ operations is the simple fact that it is easier for women to evade the police checks. “The strategy proved to be a powerful psychological weapon, as well as tactically successful, since women better managed to avoid the scrutiny” of security forces.⁴³ The powerful combination of Islamic

³⁹ Gabrielle Giroday, “Russia’s Black Widows”, *Maisonneuve*, March 29, 2010, <http://maisonneuve.org/pressroom/article/2010/mar/29/maisonneuve-vault-russias-black-widows/>, (last access May 23, 2012).

⁴⁰ Ibid, 98.

⁴¹ Mark McDonald, “Chechnya's Eerie Rebels: Black Widows - the 19 black-clad female terrorists in Moscow's theatre siege - are still shrouded in mystery one year later”, *The Montreal Gazette*, October 24, 2003.

⁴² Andrew Osborn, “Moscow bombing: who are the Black Widows”, *The Telegraph*, March 29, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/7534464/Moscow-bombing-who-are-the-Black-Widows.html>, (last access May 23, 2012).

⁴³ Miriam Elder, “Moscow Bombings Blamed on Chechnya’s Black Widows”, *The Guardian*, March 29, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/29/black-widows-women-moscow-bombings> (last access May 23, 2012).

religion (or in the media- fundamentalism), the scary image of the black widow as a monstrosity with no reason left to live and the barrage of heavy hitting attacks over the last decade have brought the black widows significant fame as lurid and deadly harbingers of terrorism, who have quite successfully and single handedly taken the leading role in the North Caucasus' ongoing separatist/terrorist movement for independence from Russia. "Women have redefined the face of the Chechen struggle by becoming invaluable commodities for a political faction desperate for attention. And in a country where famed gun designer Mikhail Kalashnikov, an ex-Soviet army hack, has sold his name to a German vodka company, the effectiveness of using female violence to garner buzz for the Chechen cause cannot be overlooked."⁴⁴

2.1 The Term "Black Widow" is Born

The term describing Russia's female suicide bombers as "black widows" is the popular way of calling the actual "shahidka" — a Russian derivative of the Arabic word "shahid", meaning female martyr. "Covered from head to toe in all-black Islamic robes with only their determined, kohl-lined eyes showing, they quickly came to be called the 'black widows' as a horrified world watched."⁴⁵ The name black widow is rumored to have been coined by the Russian media after female suicide bombing attacks in the early 2000's, and became more widespread and an internationally known term following the 2002 Moscow Dubrovka Theatre hostage crisis which was carried out in part by female rebels. "They gained notoriety when images of Chechen women dressed in black chadors, their waists and chests adorned with bombs, flooded Russian television screens during the three-day Moscow theatre hostage crisis in October 2002 that left 129 people dead."⁴⁶ The name in and of itself is a combination of the lethally poisonous black widow spiders, and a play on the word

⁴⁴ Giroday, "Russia's Black Widows."

⁴⁵ Ibid, 97.

⁴⁶ Elder, "Moscow Bombings Blamed on Chechnya's Black Widows."

widow- as many of the women who become shahidka are claimed to be widowers of husbands killed by Russian security forces. “The fact that it is the female black widow spider that is poisonous and not the male and that, occasionally, the female spider may kill the male spider after mating, has led to the nickname of ‘black widow’ for women who are violent towards men in their lives. The ‘black widow’ epithet automatically sends the signal that the Chechen women are poisonous and violent towards a certain population – here, the Russians.”⁴⁷

The name is effective, as it undermines their humanity and merely identifies them as bloodthirsty and vengeful monsters and blankets them all in a singular category: terrorists whose claims are illegitimate. “The use of the ‘black widow’ narrative falls into this category as a dehumanizing (monstrous) rhetorical device that ‘allows’ Russia to respond with unnecessary force”.⁴⁸ Media reporting often refers to black widows as belonging to “legions” or larger groups of women just like them- having been recruited and trained by separatist Chechen rebel men. Black widows are seen as the “most terrifying tool” employed against the Russian psyche, and are often described as “warped, mad beasts, fanatical, and a key element in the atavistic loathing between Russia and Chechnya.”⁴⁹ These descriptions hold a concrete power over the prevailing narratives on the black widows, and show the one-sidedness of their representation as irrational avengers. This fails to put into proper context the historical brutality and complexity of the war between Russia and Chechnya (and according to some, the broader North Caucasus region as well). Russian officials maintain that black widows are ‘brainwashed into their missions’ and that Chechen rebel leaders “use hypnosis, drugs, anything to alter the minds of these simple village girls”. They are routinely characterized as brainwashed, and officials allege the women are also drugged and that often

⁴⁷ Ibid, 100.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 97.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 103.

their families are blackmailed by being shown videotapes of their rape, which dishonors them and their families.⁵⁰

Going hand in hand with the sensational characterization of black widows, is the equally lurid tale of the “Black Fatima”. Black Fatima is rumored to be the “ring leader” or chief of the black widows, who allegedly trains and watches over them throughout planned attacks, making sure they detonate and fulfill their missions. She is reportedly the mastermind behind terrorist operations involving black widow suicide missions, and is known as the most wanted woman in Russia. However, the question still remains whether Black Fatima even exists, or if she is a propaganda creation that has succeeded in reaching urban legend levels in Russia. The Russian media characterization of her is particularly salient, as it paints a veritable “evil” portrait for the public. “With her stringy, black hair and a hooked nose, “Black Fatima” looks a lot more like the Wicked Witch of the West than a terrorist mastermind, but then again, she’s no average terrorist. While groups like Hezbollah and Al Qaeda promise religious salvation to their members, “Black Fatima” opts for a more forceful approach using drugs and hypnosis to send her “Black Widows” on suicide missions.”⁵¹ Other descriptions of Black Fatima depict her as wearing “black furs” and having a “crooked nose” and almost always involve her usage of mind altering drugs mixed with orange juice to numb the black widows’ minds during training and especially before a planned suicide attack.

Due to eyewitness accounts from Russian citizens involved in the Beslan and Moscow Dubrovka Theatre crises who identified a woman they thought to be the Black Fatima, she is suspected of being behind both tragedies. However, it is important to note that

⁵⁰ Ibid, 105.

⁵¹ Michael Greene, “Russia Finds its own Black Magic Woman”, *The Dartmouth Independent*, September 15, 2004, <http://www.dartmouthindependent.com/archives/2004/09/russia-finds-it.html> (last access May 23, 2012).

many experts deny the existence of Black Fatima, and believe she is a fabrication created by the Russian authorities to explain why increasing numbers of women from the North Caucasus are joining the black widow ranks as suicide bombers. This cover is easier than admitting the societal and economic factors, extreme poverty and loss of relatives due to Russian controlled “disappearances” and Black Fatima, whether real or make believe, represents the importance in Russian society of the existence of a woman facilitator in Chechen terrorist activities.⁵² Her mysteriousness is prominent and eroticized- this is not limited only to the Black Fatima, but also holds true in the descriptions of black widows as mysterious, faceless and exotic, which serves to fetishize the women and their violence. These characterizations are present in almost every account of black widow violence.⁵³

2.2 The 2002 Dubrovka Theatre Hostage Crisis: Moscow, Russia

In the grand scheme of Chechen attacks on Russian civilians, the 2002 Moscow Dubrovka Theatre hostage crisis is considered to be the breakout large scale terrorist attack that truly made the black widows an internationally known reality and renewed international attention to Russia’s war with Chechnya.⁵⁴ The crisis can also be attributed to sparking the media frenzy over black widows, as footage and eyewitness accounts of them came pouring out after the siege was over: all the shakhidka died in the hall, and the footage of them sitting dead in their seats was on all the Russian TV channels.⁵⁵ Black Widows became a popular topic for discussion after Dubrovka, especially among Russian women: "Are they completely inhuman? Why do they hate us so? Why don't they live peacefully in their homes and look

⁵² Kim Cragin and Sara Daly, "Women as Terrorists; Mothers, Recruiters, and Martyrs" *The Free Library*, August 1, 2009, [http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Women as terrorists; mothers, recruiters, and martyrs.-a0205550119](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Women+as+terrorists;+mothers,+recruiters,+and+martyrs.-a0205550119) (last access May 24, 2012).

⁵³ Ibid, 104.

⁵⁴ Lisa McAdams, “Russians Remember Slain Hostages at Dubrovka Theater on First Anniversary of Seige”, *IWS The Information Warfare Site*, October 23, 2003, <http://www.iwar.org.uk/news-archive/2003/10-23-12.htm> (last access May 23, 2012).

⁵⁵ Luba Vinogradova, “Deadly Secret of the Black Widows”, *The Times* (London), October 22, 2003.

after their kids?"⁵⁶ The attack involved the hostile takeover of a Moscow Theatre, on the opening night of the performance Nord-Ost, when Chechen rebels succeeded in taking around nine hundred people hostage. The hostage situation lasted for two and a half days, until Russian security forces used lethal gas pumped in through the ventilation system and moved into the theatre, killing all the rebels and, accidentally, around one hundred and thirty civilians in the process. According to reports, approximately nineteen of the fifty terrorists were women, or black widows: "Among the hostage takers were 19 women -- marking the largest participation of female Chechen militants in any operation since the start of Russia's second war against separatists in the North Caucasus republic."⁵⁷

Interestingly, while language typically used in the Russian media to describe the black widows wipes them of any emotion, feeling or agency in what they are doing, the eyewitness accounts from the Dubrovka Theatre paint a different picture of the black widow's psyche. "One of the hostages, Irina Filipova, 29, a Moscow teacher, still has mixed feelings about her captors. Some seemed willing participants. Others were teenagers who seemed too young to hold any opinions at all. Most told horrific stories of their lives in Chechnya. Filipova said: 'they didn't talk politics. They said things, which anyone could understand. They would say, "My whole family was killed. I have buried all my children. I live in the forest. I have nowhere to go and nothing to live for. 'Some cried. One of them told me her parents had sold her into it [terrorism] and she didn't want to blow herself up."⁵⁸

Descriptions of the black widows during the theatre siege echo a more nurturing narrative than usual. The women would bring in medicine and food during the takeover, in a sense,

⁵⁶ McAdams, "Russians Remember Slain Hostages at Dubrovka Theater on First Anniversary of Siege."

⁵⁷ Irina Lagunina, "Russia: Nord-Ost Anniversary Recalls Ascent of Female Suicide Bomber", *Radio Free Europe*, May 29, 2012, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1072365.html> (last access May 22, 2012).

⁵⁸ Viv Groskop, "Women at Heart of the Terror Cells", *The Guardian*, September 5, 2004, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/sep/05/russia.chechnya1> (last access May 22, 2012).

taking care of their victims even as they held them against their will. One hostage described a Chechen female terrorist as ‘very normal. She hid her feelings behind a mask of courtesy.... She would ask people about their children. She would always say, “Everything will be fine. It will finish peacefully”. This positions the women within the narrative as caretakers, nurturers, and as peacemakers.’⁵⁹

A prevalent outcome from the discourse analysis from survivors of Dubrovka is that their recollections are confused and highly varied. Many wonder if the black widows were there through “revenge against Russian atrocities or because they had been sold into suicidal slavery by Chechen warlords”.⁶⁰ This confusion also led to the popularization of the term *zombirovaniye*, which literally means, “turned into zombies” in Russian and relates to the usage of drugs on the black widows during the siege. “It has been proven in cases where women were used by the northern Caucasus region groups that some of the women took narcotics, as happened in the Moscow Dubrovka Theatre operation. It has also been proven that some of these women faced strong social pressure due to immoral behavior. So they sought to redeem themselves by joining the groups and carrying out suicide operations.”⁶¹ The narrative encompassing drugs, brainwashing, blackmail and *zombirovaniye* is incredibly disturbing, and makes the women who are involved in suicide bombing appear to be involuntarily enslaved. Sergei Yastrzhembsky, Putin’s senior adviser on Chechnya, told a *New York Times* reporter: “Chechens are turning these young girls into *zombies* using psycho-tropic drugs ... I have heard that they rape them and record the rapes on video. After that, such Chechen girls have no chance at all of resuming a normal life in Chechnya. They have only one option to blow themselves up with a bomb full of nails and ball-bearings.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid, 102.

⁶⁰ Groskop, “Women at Heart of the Terror Cells”.

⁶¹ “Women Suicide Bombers in Russia”, *Al-Arabiya*, Russia BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union. (London: BBC, April 19, 2010).

⁶² Ibid, 105.

This narrative underscores the utterly inhuman and monstrous characterization of the black widows and melds it with the “whore” narrative also prevalent within the Russian media-women who have nothing to live for and no standards for anything other than blood and lust.

There are more accounts that add to the negative power of the Russian narratives on black widows: “The sudden appearance of the Black Widows -- clad from head to toe in black, and wearing pouches packed with explosives and lethal pieces of scrap metal--marked a brutal turning point in an already horrible war. Survivors of the theatre siege say the women terrorists were the most determined and aggressive of their captors. They were cruel and threatening, and taunted their hostages, saying their *lust for death* was stronger than their captives desire to live.”⁶³ This drastic dichotomy in the eyewitness reporting and the utter shock value of Dubrovka began both the public and media frenzies to understand the black widows, and most certainly was a poignant event in putting black widows on the international radar as terrorists and instilling awe and fear into the Russian public.

2.3 The 2004 Beslan Hostage Crisis: North Ossetia, Russia

In 2004, Dubrovka was essentially trumped by yet another hostage crisis, but this time involving young school children- an act that proved to be a game changer in public opinion on the black widows: there was no longer any doubt or confusion over how to perceive them. “The Beslan siege claimed a greater toll of human life than all but one act of modern terrorism, the destruction of the World Trade Center.”⁶⁴ The Beslan Crisis remains today one of the most memorable and tragic hostage situations in Russia, and represents another large-scale attack carried out in large part by black widows.

The mass hostage taking on the first day of grammar school in Beslan, North Ossetia,

⁶³ Andrew Osborn, “Russia Braces for Wave of Attacks; 'Black Widows' at Large”, *The National Post*, (Canada, March 30, 2010).

⁶⁴ C.J. Chivers, “Beslan: A Father who Overcame a Bomb”, *The International Herald Tribune*, May 29, 2006.

resulted in the deaths of roughly three hundred and thirty people - more than half children – many were allegedly killed among the mayhem of the assault by Russian security forces to take down the terrorists, in addition to those killed by the black widows' bombs.⁶⁵

“Independent sources indicated from day one of the bloody event that more than five armed women were not only among the militants, but that one of them led the group”.⁶⁶ When Russian commandos stormed the school, three women suicide bombers blew themselves up, killing hundreds of others along with them. This drastic and horrid attack weighed heavy on the hearts and minds of the Russian public and caused mass feelings of revulsion and hatred against the Chechens and black widows for the murder of innocent school children. "A bigger blow could not have been dealt on us," one of the (Chechen) separatists' spokesmen said at the time. "People around the world will think that Chechens are beasts and monsters if they could attack children."⁶⁷

Beslan changed both Russian and international opinions to a move to a more hard line approach on Chechnya and black widows in general. This is particularly evident the public statements of then Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose language in his first press conference after Beslan was harsh and also telling, as he refused to hold a public investigation into the massacre. Putin's responses to reporters questions about Beslan and possible negotiations with Chechens follow: “Why don't you meet Osama bin Laden, invite him to Brussels or to the White House and engage in talks, ask him what he wants and give it to him so he leaves you in peace? Why don't you do that?” he said with searing sarcasm. "You find it possible to set some limitations in your dealings with these bastards, so why

⁶⁵ Fred Weir, “After Moscow attack, Russians question Putin's war on terror; Russians are asking whether the repeated ability of jihadists from the turbulent northern Caucasus to strike at will in Moscow means that the country is losing its own war on terror”. *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 25, 2011.

⁶⁶ Hamid Mir, “Black Widows Behind Beslan Tragedy”, *The Rediff Special*, September 8, 2004, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2004/sep/08spec1.htm> (last access May 23, 2010).

⁶⁷ Robert A. Pape, Lindsey O'Rourke and Jenna McDermit, “What makes Chechen Women Dangerous?” *The International Herald Tribune*, (Chicago: April 1, 2010).

should we talk to people who are child killers? No one has a moral right to tell us to talk to child killers," he added."⁶⁸

After Beslan was over, reports began to come out that the black widows were blown up prematurely by other rebels, due to alleged wavering about the young ages of the hostages. "This points to the potential for a lack of female self-determination when it comes to the timing of their own death. If detonating oneself, for some, is the ultimate political statement of desperation, then the power equation of who's bombing the bomber has yet to be addressed."⁶⁹ This combination of questioning black widows' own resolve to blow up children was paired up with the zombie metaphors and resulted in the growing public opinion that the black widows were mere pawns used in the male Chechen rebels' operations. The keywords of drugged, hallucinating, and weak were commonly seen in the reporting, in an effort to undermine the agency of the black widows in their roles during Beslan. These prevailing narratives post-Beslan were coupled with the use of strong language from the media and President Putin, calling the event horrific and unimaginable and stressing time and time again the mass casualties of young children. Beslan successfully triggered the propaganda wave against black widows and Chechen rebels (that was backed by the government), and even carried out a public anti-terrorism rally following Beslan in which tens of thousands of people attended in Red Square. "The Moscow crowd of about 130,000 people -- some bearing banners saying, "We won't give Russia to terrorists" and "The enemy will be crushed; victory will be ours".⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Jonathan Steele, "Angry Putin Rejects Public Beslan Inquiry", *The Guardian*, September 7, 2004, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/sep/07/russia.chechnya> (last access May 23, 2012).

⁶⁹ Giroday, "Russia's Black Widows".

⁷⁰ *The Associated Press*, September 8, 2004, http://cjonline.com/stories/090804/pag_russia.shtml (last access May 24, 2012).

2.4 The 2010 Moscow Metro Bombings

March 2010 saw the revival of Russia's fear of black widows after a period of relative quiet following Beslan in 2004. The Moscow bombings also took on a new meaning with regard to Russia's consideration of black widows, since this time: both attacks were carried out by female suicide bombers, alone. During the morning rush hour, two blasts set off in two of Moscow's busiest metros killed forty people and wounded around one hundred. Reports from around the world emphasized the sex and age of the bombers, with headlines such as: "Moscow Metro Blasts: Female Suicide Bombers kill 38", and "Teenage Widow Was Moscow Metro Bomber" that focused on the black widows with a newfound zeal. Many international newspapers ran articles similar to the *Telegraph's* "Who Are the Black Widows?" in the days following the worst terrorist attack in Russia in six years.⁷¹ The Moscow blow also sparked a renewal of study into the black widows and other female terrorists, coming up with facts that prove the higher effectiveness of women in suicide terrorist operations, such as The Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism's finding that "Chechen female suicide bombers killed an average of 21 people per attack, compared with 13 for males."⁷² Then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin broke off a trip to return to Moscow and was quick to declare that the "terrorists will be destroyed".⁷³ President Dmitry Medvedev was also quick to respond to the public after the blasts, saying "They are simply beasts," and "we will find and destroy them all."⁷⁴

The metaphors and rhetoric used to describe the black widows from this event on

⁷¹ Osborn, "Moscow bombing: who are the Black Widows".

⁷² Alissa de Carbonnel, "Moscow Hunts for more "Black Widows", *USA Today*, April 1, 2010, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-03-31-blackwidow_N.htm (last access May 24, 2012).

⁷³ Aydar Buribayev, "Suicide Bombers Kill at least 38 in Moscow Subway", *Reuters*, March 29, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/03/29/us-russia-metro-blast-idUSTRE62S0FM20100329>, (last access May 24, 2012).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

seems to change dramatically from the Russian side, moving into a much more animalistic and vengeful portrait, rather than the previous drugged zombies prevalent after Beslan. This marked change also highlighted some of the biggest differences between the western and Russian media reporting on the black widows, underscoring Russia's anger at the return of the black widow terror nightmare they thought had been defeated before the Moscow attack. Notably, this time the women had acted alone and succeeded in two very lethal operations, which led to changes in opinion on exactly how much of a threat they were: "They're very well organized and very well orchestrated, and clearly the women involved know exactly what they are doing."⁷⁵

Hand in hand with the fresh vilification of the black widows goes the strengthened fear of the public of any dark colored or black wearing woman on the streets of Moscow. A renewed paranoia seems to have gripped the public as a result of the attacks and the successful psychological effects of the anti-black widow propaganda. "Toughened Muscovites have learned to shrink not from the average woman on the street, but from that quintessential Russian icon: the babushka. The "plump" woman sitting across from you on the train—women wearing explosives often look overweight and wear bulky clothes—could be packing enough C-4 to destroy half a kilometre of tunnel."⁷⁶ Putin's statements after the attacks harken back to his usual patriarchal tone, and speak of a stepped up military and counter-terrorist effort: "We know they (terrorists) are lying low, but it is already a matter of pride for the law enforcement agencies to *drag them out of the sewer* and into broad daylight."⁷⁷ In 2010, after the attack, and in addition to Putin's harsh statements of vengeance, the FSB (formerly KGB and Russia's internal security service) released

⁷⁵ Giroday, "Russia's Black Widows."

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Alexey Nikolsky, "Putin Talks Tough After Moscow Subway Bombings", *USA Today*, March 30, 2010, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-03-30-Moscow_N.htm, (last access May 24, 2012).

statements specifically about the black widows, hitting heavily on the narrative of “whore” and explaining their opinions on black widow sexuality: “A larger number of them are girls from troubled families who began a *haphazard sexual life early*, and, as people say, they have nothing to look forward to on the level of creating a normal family. So they in fact marry fighters - without any wedding or other rituals, including the blessing of their parents - that is how the special services reveal the social portrait of a shahidka.”⁷⁸ The whore narrative fits in with the beastly and animal image also portrayed by Putin and Medvedev. During this time after the 2010 attack, a new term of “human bombs” became popular and was used commonly in the Russian media, for example in this passage from a Russian newspaper: “We still have a long way to go to reach feminine equality here, so it is easy for Russians to imagine a dumb creature being turned into a *living bomb*.” This also erases any pity for female terrorists.”⁷⁹

Chapter 3: East vs. West, a Battle of the Discourses

The main schism between the western and Russian media and their prevalent narratives on the black widows occurred after the 2010 Moscow metro attacks. This could be for a multitude of reasons, both internal within Russia and also external: such as the global “war on terror” in the years following September 11. These factors and others, as outlined in more detail of the third and final chapter have a significant influence on the ways black widows are portrayed to the public and the specific language (in terms of metaphors, narratives and frames) used to describe them and explain their actions.

Through a close analysis of the discourse immediately following the Moscow metro attacks, the significant difference in the narratives becomes evident, whereas before (in the fallout from the Dubrovka and Beslan crises) the narratives were not that highly

⁷⁸ Viktor Sokirko, “Politics: The Chief Terrorist of Dagestan has been Killed, but the Terrorist Attacks Continue. Why?” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Moscow, August 24, 2010.

⁷⁹ Vadim Dubnov, “Legend of the Black Widow”, *Novaya Gazeta*, Moscow, April 12, 2010.

differentiated, as the world was just beginning to become acquainted with the black widows and the larger issues between Russia and the North Caucasus. The terms such as “zombie” were more commonly used to describe the black widows before 2010, but the Moscow attacks changed that- since they proved the women were clearly capable of carrying out a large-scale attack on their own volition, and without the assistance of men.

In the west, the Moscow attacks were met with mostly shocked responses, due to both the surprisingly young age of one of the bombers and the fact that the women carried out the attack without any assistance. The young woman bomber, who was reportedly only seventeen years old at the time of the attack, became the central figure in the media’s reporting about the incident. Adding to the effect of her young age was her name: “Paradise”, and a few leaked photos of her posing with weapons in Islamic dress with her then husband (also a rebel terrorist). Western media quickly jumped on the dramatic story of Paradise, and frequently used terms such as: “baby-faced”, “teenage defiance”, and a “photo of love, terrorist style” to describe the story of the young Dagestani suicide bomber. The west also portrayed Paradise to have “fallen under the influence of Islamists, who *persuaded her* to sacrifice her life to avenge her husband.”⁸⁰ Continuing along the narrative of an innocent young girl, taken advantage of by men and coerced into becoming a suicide bomber, further descriptions such as this excerpt from a London newspaper: “The *soft facial features* peeking out from behind a black Muslim headscarf are those of a *child; almost cherub-like...her innocent face* is belied by the gun she holds in her hand.”⁸¹ The *New York Times* also took a strong stance on the incident, backing up western opinions and providing their analysis of the photo circulated of Paradise with her husband: “Baby-faced, she looks barely a teenager. “And posing with his arm around this 17-year-old woman is the man who would

⁸⁰ Richard Sisk, “Face of a Killer Black Widow”, *New York Daily News*, April 3, 2010.

⁸¹ Shaun Walker, “Suicide bomber 'widow of terrorist leader'; Russia says seventeen-year-old was one of 'black widows' who attacked Moscow metro”, *The Independent* (London), April 3, 2010.

put her on this path, a 30-year-old militant leader *who lured her from her single mother, drew her into fundamentalist Islam and married her.*"⁸² This depiction suggests that Paradise was not to blame for her choices or actions, and that she was exploited as a teenager with no father. Western narratives of the black widows tend to place the blame not on the women themselves, but the men who "lure" and "coerce" the women into becoming terrorists. Also, some western media even included the North Caucasus region's instability as a reason for the women to be turning to terrorism, as seen in reporting from Ireland: "often they are simply teenage girls, who have been sold by their families, kidnapped or drugged. It is a tragic indictment of the region's lawlessness."⁸³

The depiction of the attacks and black widows from the Russian side shows a very different interpretation, which brings to light the most important point of this thesis: that the prevalent language used to describe certain events and issues is inextricably linked to the underlying goals of the state and used as a propaganda tool by the government to achieve those goals. In this case, the goal being a propaganda war against the black widows and rebels from the North Caucasus in order to legitimize to the public operations in the region. In the analysis of Russian governmental statements and Russian media reporting following the Moscow bombings, the stark differences between the Russian and western sides become evident. President Medvedev was quoted as saying the following at a meeting with Dagestani leaders following the incident: "We have ripped the heads off the most infamous bandits, but it appears that this was not enough," Mr. Medvedev said. "We will track them all down in due time and will punish them all, just as we did to the previous ones. We will act only this

⁸² Clifford Levy and Ellen Barry, "Lured Into Russian Jihad, 17-Year-Old Avenges Slain Husband", *The New York Times*, April 3, 2010.

⁸³ (No author named), "Last Tuesday, just 24 hours after suicide bombers killed 39 people on the Moscow metro, a pair of explosions claimed 12 more lives in Dagestan, a republic near Chechnya, in Russia's troubled south", *Belfast Telegraph*, April 5, 2010.

way."⁸⁴ Medvedev's message was both predictable and echoed that of Prime Minister Putin. He even went further, implementing a new law on aiding or abetting any suspected terrorist, demanding that: "those who helped terrorists be punished...we have to create such a model for terrorist crimes that anyone who helps them - no matter what he does, be it cook the soup or wash the clothes - has committed a crime," Mr. Medvedev said.⁸⁵ The *Moscow News* reported along lines of public opinion and surprisingly gave an analysis of the prevalent Russian media coverage of terrorist events in the following excerpt: "Russian public opinion, as the insurgents' strategy increasingly included terrorist attacks against civilians in Moscow and elsewhere, became ever-hardened against the rebels, and was fed by a constant diet of nationalist media coverage that has tarred all people from the Caucasus with the same brush in the eyes of many Russians."⁸⁶ Other Russian newspapers such as *Izvestia* and *Kommersant* were busy looking for a motive. "In any case, their main aim is to increase tensions between the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia," *Izvestia* wrote. And meanwhile, others were debunking myths about "black widows", with *Komsomolskaya Pravda* writing that these female suicide bombers normally appeared in everyday clothes rather than hijab and black clothing. Nor were the recruits necessarily religious.⁸⁷ The initial responses in Russia after the attack were delayed, as the main state television networks did not show footage or cover the bombings until they received instructions from the Kremlin. The reports that did come out involved the gruesome showing of video across the three main national Russian television channels (Channel 1, NTV and Rossiya) of the severed heads of the (then) suspected female suicide bombers, which was accompanied by Medvedev's characterization

⁸⁴ Fred Weir, "Russia Islamist network takes shape as Caucasus hit by another terrorist attack", *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 5, 2010.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Tim Wall, "When will Russia's Caucasus war end?" *The Moscow News*, April 5, 2010.

⁸⁷ Anna Arutunyan, "How Russian and Western media reported the bombings", *The Moscow News*, April 1, 2010.

of them as “beasts”.⁸⁸ “The networks, all of which are controlled by the government or state-owned companies, stayed with their regularly scheduled programming as the tragedy unfolded, waiting for up to two hours to provide their first substantive reports on the attacks.”⁸⁹

It is important to ask why there existed such a large discrepancy between the western and Russian media depiction of the black widows involved in the Moscow metro bombings that did not previously exist as strongly before 2010. The western positive “innocent victim” narrative is a striking contrast to the Russian negative “beastly” animalistic response, strengthened by the Russian media’s public showing of the severed heads of black widows and reporting on their lust for revenge and blood. The following sections of the chapter will dive deeper into the possible reasons for this differential and also extrapolate on the policy implications of these narratives moving into the future.

3.1 The “Putin Effect”

One cannot fully understand or begin to discuss Russia’s relationship with the North Caucasus and the associated terrorism and operations in the region without taking into consideration the large role-played by the infamous Vladimir Putin, who, after a tenuous election in 2012 is now again the President of the Russian Federation. Involved in the predictions many political analysts and journalists alike, there was speculation that Putin would attempt to use the terrorist attacks in 2010 and 2011 (at Domodedovo airport) as a stepping-stone to his next Presidential election. “His tough talk suggests Mr. Putin may now use the crisis (Moscow Metro attacks) as a launch pad to return to the presidency in two

⁸⁸ Luke Harding, “Investigators Warn of Further Attacks as Moscow Metro Death Toll Rises”, *The Guardian*, March 30, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/30/russia-terrorism> (last access, May 24, 2012).

⁸⁹ Carl Schreck, “Why the Bombings weren’t Breaking News in Russia”, *Time Magazine*, March 31, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1976750,00.html> (last access, May 24, 2010).

years.”⁹⁰ Much of the speculation surrounding Putin and his political power is connected to Russia’s “war on terror” and Putin’s personal pledges to smite the terrorists from the North Caucasus. This trend is in large part due to the rhetoric and language he typically uses in the public sphere when speaking out against terrorism. His sound bites lend credence to the strongly negative narratives about black widows and the overall situation with the North Caucasus and their separatist movement, and are further examined in this section of the chapter.

Putin, who once threatened to “waste” terrorists “in the outdoor toilet”, has vowed to “scrape them out of the sewers” in the aftermath of the Moscow metro bombings. And it is “not by accident that he is using almost the same words as when elected President in March, 2000: “The Chechens, we will throw them down the toilet”. He has just ordered his intelligence services to “sweep the sewers” to find the terrorists. The best and the brightest Russian political scientists seem to agree that the suicide bombings will help Putin to turbo-charge repression all across the Caucasus, not only in Chechnya but also in Ingushetia and Dagestan.”⁹¹ Putin has been careful to denounce any connections between Russian counter-terrorist operations in the North Caucasus with the terrorist attacks carried out against Russian citizens, which seems to be a logical and almost blatant connection to most journalists and political analysts outside of Russia. Putin characteristically uses the terrorist attacks as opportunities to denounce these connections and solidify the government’s fight against terrorism at the same time. This is evidenced in the following excerpt of his statement following the Beslan tragedy: “Striking the table with the side of his right hand, he said there

⁹⁰ Will Stewart and Mark Reynolds, “Moscow: Putin Demands Capture of 21 Black Widow Suicide Bombers”, *The Express UK*, May 29, 2012, <http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/166195/Moscow-Putin-demands-capture-of-21-Black-Widow-suicide-bombers-Moscow-Putin-demands-capture-of-21-Black-Widow-suicide-bombers> (last access May 24, 2012).

⁹¹ Pepe Escobar, “The Black Widow Riddle”, *Asia Times*, April 1, 2010, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/LD01Ag02.html (last access May 23, 2012).

was *no connection* between Russian policies in Chechnya and the events in Beslan.” “Just imagine that people who shoot children in the back came to power anywhere on our planet. Just ask yourself that, and you will have *no more questions about our policy in Chechnya*,” he said.⁹² This statement, like others, serves to solidify the continued negative narratives of black widows and act as propaganda for the war against the North Caucasus. As prominent Russian political analyst Lilia Shevtsova has outlined: “In 2012 there are presidential elections,” said Ms. Shevtsova. “I can't exclude that in the Russian authorities there are forces who would like to go down the usual route in this situation (terrorist attacks). The same scheme will work: terrorist atrocity; threat to national security; strengthening of the regime.”⁹³

Putin’s strategy is also evident in the statements of other appointed Russian government officials (with strong ties to him)- some of which have made themselves very clear when discussing the issue of black widows with the public. One such example comes from Russia’s Ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, who told reporters the following about black widows: “It’s extremely important that both experts and journalists correctly describe who carried out this terrible crime. They aren’t *shakhidki*. It’s wrong to assume that that a suicide terrorist, who sent dozens of innocent people to their deaths, can call themselves martyrs for their faith. They’re not martyrs, they’re *murderers*.”⁹⁴ The comments of Rogozin, Putin and the previously mentioned excerpts from Medvedev all culminate in a singularly negative and highly stylized means of describing the black widows, whether they are referred to as “beasts”, “inhuman”, “animals” or blatantly as “murderers” which is echoed by the Russian media and effectively bends the public opinion towards a more favorable view

⁹² Steele, “Angry Putin Rejects Beslan Inquiry”.

⁹³ Shaun Walker, “Was the Motive for Attacks Revenge?”, *The Independent*, London, March 30, 2010.

⁹⁴ Nathan Hodge, “Russia’s ‘Black Widow’ Suicide Bombers Make a Return”, *Wired*, March 30, 2010, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2010/03/words-of-the-day-russias-black-widow-suicide-bombers> (last access May 24, 2012).

on the Kremlin's operations and activities in the North Caucasus.

Often, Russia's ongoing war with Chechnya and now the wider North Caucasus (Dagestan and Ingushetia) is cited as "Putin's Vietnam" in the media. Putin's reasoning for the bloody wars with Chechnya and the "handling" of the subsequent terrorist attacks against his country often come under fire, as the question has been for years "why not just give Chechnya independence?" The answer to this question and one of the main causes of the highly negative narrative language on black widows in the Russian media is found in Putin's statements from his Presidential election in 2000, as follows: "he described Chechnya as "the place where Russia's future is being decided". Shortly afterwards he told troops that they were fighting in Chechnya to put "an end to the disintegration of Russia".⁹⁵

Putin has effectively raised the stakes in the war with the Caucasus, making a direct link to the future of Russia and the successful eradication of black widows and other terrorists from the region. This rhetoric strongly correlates with the theories previously put forth- that through the narratives on black widows in Russia, attention is deflected away from the mass human rights violations happening in Chechnya and elsewhere in the North Caucasus. The narrative effectively draws attention to the black widows as illegitimate and gives them a new meaning as scapegoats for the Kremlin's policies in the region. Elements of their femininity are used to spin gendered narratives, couching them as evil "avengers" instead of female freedom fighters (taking away the tragedy of the conflict and any true political agency for their actions), bestowing on them a distinctively monstrous image.⁹⁶ Politically for Putin, the use of such narratives is paramount for maintaining political control in the country, and reinforcing the unquestionable nature of the Kremlin's policies in the North Caucasus and associated military activities there. Through a steady and constant use

⁹⁵ (No author named), "It will take more than an iron fist to stop Russia's vicious circle of Violence", *The Herald*, Glasgow, September 4, 2004.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 89.

of gendered narratives when speaking about the black widows, Putin effectively keeps them legitimate state targets with no disagreement from the public. This phenomenon can, based on the discourse and research of this thesis, be at least in part called the “Putin effect”.

3.2 The West’s Pity Vote

To show the stark contrast in the discourse, this section will give an overview of western reporting on black widows and then proceed to outline the broader reasoning for a more positive portrait of them. In analyzing media discourse on the black widows from a wide variety of western sources and countries, namely the U.S., Canada, Ireland, the UK, France and Germany, there are prevalent tones of surprise, shock, and an overarching questioning of why women would resort to terrorism as suicide bombers. Many sources mention the aspect of Russia having to adjust to the “female face” of terrorism, and stress the much higher percentage of female terrorists coming from the North Caucasus than anywhere else in the world. This trend is due to the shock value of black widows in the west and a desire to understand their motivations. After the Beslan tragedy, the following excerpt shows the general opinion of western press: “Despite the occasional female suicide bomber in the Middle East, the face of international terrorism has largely been a masculine one, with women playing the role of innocent victims, not the villains. But what would *inspire* a group of women to take up arms against their usual partners in victim-hood - children?”⁹⁷ The majority of western media cited the “tyrannical tactics” and oppressive actions of the Russian security forces as the driving factor in creating a distraught and downtrodden region throughout the North Caucasus, leaving a plethora of “so-called “Black Widows,” women *supposedly* so enraged by the loss of their husbands to the conflict that they choose to take up arms not against the Russian government, but against the Russian people themselves.”⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Greene, “Russia Finds its own Black Magic Woman.”

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Other news headlines in the west paint the picture of black widows as “reluctant killers”⁹⁹ and play up the environmental causes for their actions. This narrative overall gives the impression that the west sees black widows as a product of their environment, and places the blame for their actions on the war-torn history of the ravaged region of the North Caucasus, and indirectly on the Russian government for these trespasses.

Interestingly, the U.S. does not consider Chechen rebels or terrorists as an “official terrorist organization”, despite Russian claims that there is an established Islamic caliphate in Chechnya, led by Doku Umarov, the most wanted man in Russia (who has taken credit for many of the last decade’s terrorist attacks in Russia). The U.S. State Department’s definition of a terrorist organization is as follows: “Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) are foreign organizations that are designated by the Secretary of State in accordance with section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), as amended. FTO designations play a critical role in our fight against terrorism and are an effective means of curtailing support for terrorist activities and pressuring groups to get out of the terrorism business.”¹⁰⁰ Despite the extensive list of fifty-one global FTOs, Chechnya is not listed. Given the global nature of the “fight against terrorism”, it seems curious that the State Department does not include Chechnya, especially since the U.S. Government has been quick to respond publically after the terrorist attacks in Russia with supportive statements of assistance. While it is understandable that the narrative from the western side is much more positive and seeks to understand the plight of the black widows, as the attacks did not happen in the west, still this begs the question of just how far the west is willing to work with Russia in the global war against terror or whether they are to blame for their own backyard’s issues?

⁹⁹ Kim Murphy, “A Cult of Reluctant Killers”, Los Angeles Times, February 4, 2004, <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/feb/04/world/fg-blackwidows4/3>, (last access May 23, 2012).

¹⁰⁰ U.S. State Department, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>, (last access May 25, 2012).

3.3 The Global “War on Terror”

In the post-September 11th world, the fight against international terrorist organizations is no longer the task of just one state. In the case of Chechnya and its black widows, this truism is often cited when Putin or Medvedev claim direct links between the al-Qaeda network and the Chechen rebels. “In 2003, Putin told his ministers that ‘Chechen rebels “are not only linked with international terrorist organizations but have become an integral part of them, perhaps the most dangerous part”’. It was an intentional exaggeration to claim the Chechens as ‘the most dangerous part’ of the global terrorism network. This exaggeration reflects the use of rhetoric to justify the language of ‘wiping out’, ‘eliminating’ and ‘wasting’ the Chechen fighters, and in part the black widows.”¹⁰¹

While the U.S. is working on its “reset” with Russia, the Obama Administration has been quick to release statements of a helpful tone, yet in reality the narratives between the west and Russia certainly are very different and the U.S. does not officially recognize Chechnya as having a terrorist organization. These facts would seemingly run counter to the following Presidential statements: “The American people stand united with the people of Russia in opposition to violent extremism and terrorist attacks that demonstrate disregard for human life,” he said. Obama telephoned Medvedev to offer his condolences, the Kremlin said;¹⁰² “U.S. President Barack Obama condemned what he called an “outrageous act of terrorism”, while NATO sent a message of solidarity to Russia's government;”¹⁰³ and “Mr. Obama said America was ready to co-operate with Russia to help bring those responsible to

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 96.

¹⁰² Luke Harding, “Front: Putin vows to destroy group behind Moscow bombings”, *The Guardian*, London, March 30, 2010.

¹⁰³ (No author named), “Moscow Bombing: Carnage at Russia’s Domodedovo Airport”, *BBC News*, January 24, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-12268662> (last access May 25, 2012).

justice.”¹⁰⁴ Adding to the possible reasons for the U.S.’s lack of official follow through with assistance to Russia in rooting out terrorism, is the aspect of Georgian safe haven and whether or not it is granted to rebels from the North Caucasus. Given the close bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Georgia, the claim from Kremlin Interior Minister, Nikolai Patrushev alluding to possible involvement by Georgia in providing shelter for Chechen rebels may be inflammatory. According to Irish media: “the truth is that Russia and the west face a common enemy...however, for Russia, it is an enemy within, and the threat it poses is complicated by a history of misgovernment and nationalist separatism.”¹⁰⁵

Looking forward, there are external events that are also having an influence over the global war on terror and the more pinpointed hotspot of Russia’s North Caucasus. The decision to host the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in the resort area of Sochi, Russia has caused a surge of attention and speculation as to whether Russia is up to the challenge of making the games a safe event and protecting it from possible terrorist attacks on both the domestic (Chechens) and international terrorist levels. International press routinely mentioned the Olympic site as one highly suspected to be a terrorist target, and was clear to highlight the importance of Russia’s “war on terror” in ensuring a safe environment for the event. “The North Caucasus insurgency remains Russia’s most serious internal security threat and there are concerns it may spread west in the run-up to the 2014 Winter Olympics, to be held in the Black Sea resort of Sochi.”¹⁰⁶ In addition to the Olympics, there is also the soccer World Cup to be hosted in Russia in 2018. Although farther in the future, many

¹⁰⁴ Ivar Amundsen, “Dubrovka Theatre Siege”, <http://www.chechencenter.info/n/45-opinion/128-1.html> (last access May 25, 2012).

¹⁰⁵ (No author named), “Last Tuesday, just 24 hours after suicide bombers killed 39 people on the Moscow metro, a pair of explosions claimed 12 more lives in Dagestan, a republic near Chechnya, in Russia’s troubled south”, *Belfast Telegraph*, April 5, 2010.

¹⁰⁶ Tom Parfitt, “Five Policemen Killed by Russian ‘Black Widow’ Suicide Bomber”, *The Telegraph*, March 7, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/9127907/Five-policemen-killed-by-Russian-Black-Widow-suicide-bomber.html> (last access May 25, 2012).

journalists are already mentioning it as yet another litmus test for Russia's handling of terrorist threats: "The West will also be watching. The southern resort city of Sochi, not far from the Caucasus, is due to host the 2014 Winter Olympics. And Russia hosts the Soccer World Cup in 2018, when millions of fans will pass through airports for matches in regional cities."¹⁰⁷ Putin has allegedly staked his personal reputation on the safety of the Sochi Olympics and is intent on increasing Russia's operations in the North Caucasus to ensure this. In the media frenzy following the 2010 and 2011 bombings, speculation on security hit a high and analysts had the following comments on the Russian response: "Medvedev is very limited in what he can do," says Nikolai Petrov, an expert with the Carnegie Center in Moscow. "He needed to show his toughness and his decisiveness -- hence his harsh words -- but he also wants to avoid any escalation in the north Caucasus. The Kremlin very much needs stability there, especially as preparations for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics are seriously underway."¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

The prevalent narratives analyzed in this thesis represent the high degree of metaphoric meaning levied on the subject of black widows from both the western and Russian media and governments. The differentiation in the discourse between the west and Russia however denotes that the narrative takes on a deeper and more negative connotation in Russia, as is evidenced by the stronger language used to delegitimize and denounce the black widows in the aftermath of significant terrorist attacks against the Russian population. Though the metaphors in both the west and Russia contain highly gendered "frames" that play on the public's pre-disposed beliefs about sexuality, femininity and gender roles, they

¹⁰⁷ (No author named), "Islamist Terror a Challenge for Putin", *The Australian*, January 26, 2011.

¹⁰⁸ Fred Weir, "Russia Islamist network takes shape as Caucasus hit by another terrorist attack", *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 5, 2010.

are distinct in the wording and overall feeling that is attached to the narrative.

Through the internal and external factors discussed in chapter three of the thesis, the underlying reasons for these differences are unearthed. Kremlin power politics and the personal legacy of re-elected President Putin weigh heavily, yet the narrative is also influenced by the role of the international war on terror in a post-9/11 world and the added pressures on the Russian government to ensure the public's safety in both an everyday manner (in the wake of increased and more frequent terror attacks on Russian citizens) and the international scrutiny on security in the lead up to the 2014 Winter Olympics and 2018 World Cup.

The monstrous narratives used to describe black widows have become a lynchpin in Kremlin propaganda as a result of these factors, and show the world the Russian portrayal of the ongoing war and security services' operations in the North Caucasus. The narrative is particularly founded in the basic moral superiority of Russian masculinity over femininity and reinforces the patriarchal power of the Russian government and society by using black widow propaganda as a way to in effect blame femininity for the actions of the black widows, removing any agency, legitimacy or pity associated with their actions and plight. "The Chechens have legitimate political grievances that have created the momentum behind the extreme and brutal tactic of suicide bombing. Media and government narratives, however, gender the conflict and its participants and obscure the political reality."¹⁰⁹ The black widows represent the most recent stage of an ongoing discourse of Russian militarized masculinity that has a goal of showing the public that the state's policies in the region and against the terrorists in the North Caucasus are above questioning. The use of the term "black widow" and the associated negative narratives implicates Chechen, Dagestani and Ingush women as highly threatening, irrational, animalistic and driven as bloodthirsty beasts

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 108.

to harm Russians, successfully creating a supportive public audience to the use of excessive and often criticized as illegitimate force in Chechnya. The construction of the Russian narrative on black widows gives the Kremlin justification for any means necessary to neutralize the rebel movement in the North Caucasus (which allegedly includes gross human rights violations, disappearances, torture and a distinct reversal of women's rights in the region), which is portrayed to the world by the Russian government as part of the global "war on terror" for attempted legitimacy and support from abroad.

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