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## **The Moscow Siege: - a new Era in the Russian-Chechen War of Independence?†**

With the mass-hostage-taking occurring in Moscow this week on the anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution against Soviet Russia, the eight year conflict between Chechen separatists and the Kremlin may lurch into a new and distinctly different phase. At the moment whilst it is too early to answer many of the burning questions related itself to the attack and the seizure of the Melnyikov street theatre or to predict the manner of its ramifications, it is clear that that the incident raises several strategic level concerns related to the sphere of mobility left to the separatists since September 11<sup>th</sup> and the intentions of Moscow.

### **Change of Tactics, or More of the Same?**

Some analysts and commentators have seen a certain desperation in the current event and thus extrapolated this desperation to the rebel president Aslan Maskhadov. Whilst it is true that the location and scale of the event are unusual, it should, however, be remembered that hostage-taking is not at all new a tactic to the Chechen fighters. Since the out-break of tensions between the two parties, there have been at least nine major Chechen-orchestrated hostage events, the most famous one being the capture of Budennevsk Hospital, which led to a bungled Russia assault resulting in more than 100 deaths. Therefore, tactically, the current incident is no novelty. The important evolution may be in the fact that instead of capturing Russians and their facilities in areas close to the fighting, or elsewhere in the Federation (such as in the resort town of Lazarevskoje in 2000), the hostage have now been taken in the capital of the enemy, in Moscow. Secondly, in the past most similar operations have been executed by Chechen fighters or irregulars straight off the battlefield, very rarely accompanied by female combatants. The fact that television coverage from inside the theatre before and after the final siege showed female team members and garb with religious Muslim phraseology may indicate that this is a different kind of operation and that it may indeed be unsanctioned by the rebel president.

### **Crossing the Threshold: a prelude to disaster?**

The timing of incident may also be significant. Ever since President Putin has, at least in rhetorical terms, placed his nation right beside President Bush in the US's "War against Terror", the blunt truth is that official western monitoring and criticism of Moscow's brutal military tactics in Chechnya have all but disappeared. By quickly allying himself with the White House and even purloining much of Bush's

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terminology (joined in this tactic as he was by PM Sharon in the Middle East) Putin has leveraged a certain credibility for his tactics which he has even parlayed into a formal position for Russia in the decisionmaking apparatus of NATO with regard to key issues such as counter-terrorism, peacekeeping and WMD proliferation. All this positive repositioning of the Kremlin has occurred despite the fact that a minority of respected western media outlets have persisted in uncovering whole strings of Russian-executed atrocities in the war against the rebels, atrocities involving more and more civilian fatalities, especially in the areas around Argun, Urus-Martan and Grozny.

The sea-change in western attitudes to the Kremlin may have helped to encourage a last-ditch attempt by Chechen separatists to put an end to the conflict. The fact that siege was begun on the anniversary of the desperate attempt by Hungarian freedom-fighters to divest themselves of a cruel Moscow-controlled regime in 1956, may be a clue to the level of desperation. The important question remains, however, whether or not this team of hostage-takers – which seems more than determined enough and professional - was in fact representative of the broader separatist community, as opposed to the hardest core Islamicist extremists.

### **The End-Game: predetermined?**

If President Putin is wise, he will not use the Melnyikov Theatre incident to drive the whole Chechen movement to ground and to undermine the credibility of those leaders with whom he can still negotiate with. A complete loss of a bargaining channel as the result of the violent resolution in Moscow may condemn Moscow and Russia to a protracted war with an unconventional foe that has nothing to loose their demands are ruled out a bovo. Is the Kremlin chooses this route the “Chechen cause” may be condemned to a mutation into a protracted war of attrition on the streets of Russia, no matter what steps are taken by Putin or the current Grozny leadership. The consequences of the apparently botched rescue, which saw in excess of 100 hostages die as a result of over-dosage of the incapacitating gas used by the ALPHA entry-teams may simply exacerbate the potential for Putin to extricate himself in a victorious fashion after the incident. If indeed turns out that the regionally reported testimony of one survivor, a Bulgarian, that the agent used was sarin, or sarin related proves to be true, this alone will do severe damage to the credibility of the Moscow government and its choice of counter-terrorist tools and policies.

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