



Sebestyén L. v. Gorka
Executive Director, ITDIS

Russia and the Chechen rebels: renewed bloodshed[†]

After a ninth month lull in metropolitan violence, thirteen innocent bystanders – including one child – were killed by suicide bombers this week in Moscow. Following the tragic event, Russian president Vladimir Putin stated once more that no concessions can be made in the conflict with Chechen fighters as this would lead to the unravelling of the Russian Federation. Given the fact that for almost 10 years now the new Russian state has been unable to vanquish its separatist enemy and that the Chechens are truly a race tempered in the vicissitudes of battles, the bloodshed and regional instability appear doomed to persist. TSM looks at recent developments and possible trends in the evolution of this threat to the Russian Federation's internal security and its territorial integrity.

An old conflict

Whilst Chechnya unilaterally declared its independence from its big brother only in 1991 – via the dubiously elected General Dudayev- resistance to outside influence and control has long been a way of life for this non-Slavic, non-Turkic and non-Persian community. From Peter the Great's (failed) attempt to satisfactorily annex Dagestan in the early 1700s, to the battles of the nineteenth century led by the Islamic Avar warrior Imam Shamil, the Chechens have accepted their role of supporting any organised resistance to the centralising power of either St. Petersburg or, more recently, Moscow. Now, however, they have taken the lead, as opposed to being the backbone of someone else's force.

In the two "official" wars since the 1991 split, Moscow has leant repeatedly toward military resolutions – including devastation through the bombing of civilian areas - as opposed to a negotiated settlement. The cost for this choice has been high. Realistic estimates cite a loss of almost 100,000 troops on the Russian side despite the global number of Chechens – including the diaspora exiled by Stalin - of only just over a million.

After the attacks of September the 11th 2001, President Putin was able deftly to exploit Washington's own rhetoric of a war on terror and rapidly attempted to paint connections between al Qaeda and the Chechen separatists, going so far as to state after the recent attacks in Saudi Arabia that the modus operandi of both were so similar as to be conclusive evidence of such a connection. In fact at the beginning of the year Washington was kind enough to go so far as to even include three separatist Chechen groups on its official list of terror organisations. Even though 9/11 enabled Moscow to once again ramp up the military response to its regional problem, in this case with little or no official out cry from the West, this week's atrocity has proved

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yet again that Putin is failing in his election campaign promise of bringing an end to violence, not only in the Caucasus but in the capital. Whilst incontrovertible proof of formal connections between the two Islamicist groups have yet to be presented, with regards to modus operandi it may be significant to note that the Moscow theatre hostage event last October and this week's attack both bear witness to a move to involving young women in the front-line. Whilst this is more redolent of anti-Israeli tactics being used of late by Arab extremists, the change of tactic may of itself indicate a new stage in the evolution of the fight, at least as seen from Grozny.

Loss of control; loss of a potential partner?

The brutality of means employed by Moscow to crush the separatists has many consequences, as does Moscow's insistence that it will not negotiate with anyone. The ferocity of attacks has encouraged the creation of splinter groups and the rise of new actors out of former lower level commanders. Subsequently it came as no surprise for example after the Melnyikov siege that Moscow refused to even countenance talks with General Aslan Maskhadov, its alleged mastermind and former Chechen president (until his mandate was rescinded by the Kremlin four years ago.) In a self-fulfilling and self-defeating act, Moscow has by excluding potential partners such as Maskhadov, aided in their being weakened and in the renewal of influence of rival rebel leaders and warlords who are more than approving of the maintenance of a chaotic state of affairs that can be exploited to their own profit.

Puppets and the people's choice

Whilst it may be too early to hope that a Kremlin that in all its deeds appears to be recentralising its powers will cave into the demands of its nascent civil society, certain trends cannot be ignored, at least not without risk to the governments legitimacy. With fighting having continued now for nigh on a decade, there is a generation in Chechnya which has come to age with a personal experience of nothing but violence, women included. Perhaps more significantly for Russia's fledging democrats, the polls have for the first time evinced the fact that in excess of 60% of the population is in favour of a negotiated settlement with the republic. When one hears recognised hard-liners such as the Yevgeny Primakov also call for talks with the rebels then a sea-change cannot be denied.

Ironically the recent attack came just one day after Putin announced the October dates for the election of a regional president for the republic. Even so, given the credentials of the current local pro-Moscow administration and the reports by the Council of Europe's Lord Judd of how the recent referendum on autonomy was handled, it is clear that these measures orchestrated by Moscow lack even a veneer of credibility and will in no way placate even the more moderate supporters of a free Chechen republic. Nevertheless it is clear that the Kremlin cannot at the moment do an about-face and give the appearance of having succumbed to the power of the separatists' gun and bomb. Moreover, nor can it hope to ensure for the safety of its capital's citizens, let alone its soldiers deployed in the Caucasus, unless it renounces its determination to resolve the conflict by means of force alone and/or through the



offices of quisling appointees unable to generate legitimate support for themselves inside the republic. If it refuses to recognise these hard truths, it will simply give the Chechens further opportunities to reinforce what Mikhail Lermontov said of them one hundred and fifty years ago: “Their god is freedom, their law is war.”

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The author is Executive Director of the Institute for Transitional Democracy and International Security. He is also a fellow of the Terrorism Research Center and regular lecturer at the NATO School Oberammergau and the FBI International Law Enforcement Academy.