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Home-Grown Terrorism – Russia’s Ticking Bomb

Vladimir Putin’s muscular foreign policy continues to divert attention away from a major security problem in Russia’s outlands. Today, Maia Otarashvili and Aleksandr Fisher trace the evolution of terrorism in the northern Caucasus region and Moscow’s efforts to bring a degree of stability to its restive southern republics.

By Aleksandr Fisher and Maia Otarashvili for ISN

The Sochi Winter Olympics re-illuminated the serious problem of domestic terrorism in Russia. However, Vladimir Putin’s artful maneuvering has successfully diverted the international community’s attention to the Ukraine crisis and away from this alarming issue. This is a problem that cannot be swept under the rug as there are important international consequences for Russia’s festering domestic terrorist concerns. The terrorist groups in northern Caucasus are part of rapidly globalizing network of Jihadists and self-made terrorists. The Boston Marathon bombers are a good example of such online-trained, self-made extremists who used their Chechen heritage as an inspiration for seeking out information online and waging their own Jihad.

Putin’s interests lay elsewhere. He is working hard on creating an illusion of a strong Russian empire that can outweigh the West. He has made it very clear that he plans to accomplish this by restoring as much of [Russia’s Soviet-era-like glory](#) as possible through any means necessary. On the other hand the threat of terrorism in Russia is neither a minor one nor dormant, and Russians continue to express growing fears about domestic terrorist attacks. According to the [All-Russian Public Opinion Research Centre \(VTsIOM\)](#), 63% of Russians do not believe that the authorities can protect them from terrorists activities, and of that figure, 44% believe that there can be no refuge from terrorism.

Between 1990 and 2013 (with the exception of 2009), approximately 50% of Russians [expressed fear](#) that they or their family may be victims of terrorist attacks. In the same time period, Russia experienced [over 150 incidents](#) of terrorist acts. And since Putin became president in 1999, Russia has experienced over 130 terrorist attacks, with the Moscow apartment bombings (1999), Dubrovka Theater hostage crisis (2002), and the Beslan school bombings (2004) being the most high-profile. These three major terrorist attacks - as well as the series of suicide bombings in late 2013 - highlight the still unresolved domestic terrorism problem facing Russia.

So far, Putin has been able to harness Russian fears of terrorist attacks to bolster his own approval ratings, but this has come at a very high price for him and has done little to ensure stable and lasting

peace in the north Caucasus. Moreover, domestic terrorism in Russia has experienced an alarming transformation in the last decade. It has turned from a secular separatist movement in Chechnya and internal religious divisions in Dagestan, to an internationally funded hub for Jihadists. Not only are the Chechen and Dagestan terrorist movements part of the global network of terrorists, they can also be credited with creating new methods of suicide-bombings. By using grieving female family members that the male rebel fighters leave behind, the Chechen terrorists have ensured that when the Russian authorities cut off the head of the proverbial dragon, a few more grow in its place in the form of the so-called "Black Widows."

The two Chechen Wars

Terrorism in Russia originates from the *northern* Caucasus regions of Dagestan, North Ossetia, Ingushetia and Chechnya. Hostile Russian-Chechnyan relations date back to the Russian Empire's annexation of Chechnya in 1870. Chechen attempts at gaining independence from Russia have ended in bloodshed and war ever since. In 1944, more than half a million Chechens, Ingush and other north Caucasian peoples were exiled to Siberia and Central Asia by the Soviet government as punishment for collaborating with the invading German forces from 1940-1944. After many years of living under the rule of the Russian Empire, then Bolshevik Russia and later the Soviet Union, Chechnya was finally able to take advantage of Soviet Russia's fragmentation in the early 1990s. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Chechnya declared independence in 1993 as the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.

Only a year after Chechnya declared independence, the Russian government took advantage of domestic infighting in the republic and joined forces with Chechen separatists to launch an attack on the capital, Grozny. The ensuing conflict lasted almost two years, ending in August 1996 after a number of bloody clashes where thousands were killed, injured, and internally displaced. Although a formal peace treaty was signed in 1997, less than two years later the Chechen Islamic International Brigade launched an invasion into neighboring Russian Republic of Dagestan. The armed conflict ended with a major Russian victory and led to the second Chechen war. This war ended in May 2000 after Russia established direct rule over Chechnya. The harsh Russian tactics during the conflict fundamentally altered the nature of the Chechen struggle for independence into a broader movement for revenge that was eventually fueled by Jihadist ideology.

Secular separatism turns Jihadist

Islam is said to have reached the north Caucasus in the 7th century, but it was only in the 16th century that most Chechens adopted the religion. Yet, as [Princeton Professor Michael Reynolds explains](#), "the Chechens' customary law and traditions, known as *adat* from the Arabic word for "custom," to distinguish them from the *sharia*, continued to define life. Seven decades of Communist suppression of religious practice, however, had left the vast majority of Chechens ignorant about the practice and doctrines of their faith but eager to learn more." Accordingly, the first Chechen war not only received a great deal of international attention for its atrocious war crimes, it also gave birth to radical Islamism in Chechnya and sparked immediate interest among Jihadists everywhere.

According to Reynolds, along with their [arms, the Jihadists brought to the Caucasus a strict and austere interpretation of Islam known as Salafism](#). In addition, their knowledge of Arabic and ability to cite in the original the sources of Islam such as the Quran, coupled with their willingness to sacrifice themselves for Jihad proved persuasive to many young Chechens. Thus, the secular movement for Chechen independence that began in the early 1990s finally turned extreme by attracting the wrong kind of international attention.

The insurgency phase that followed the second Chechen war only came to an end in early 2009. Not only were the terrorists able to challenge Moscow's rule over Chechnya for nine years, they also created a permanent hub for radical Islamists with alleged connections to the Taliban. Indeed, a small group of insurgents are still fighting in the republic under the self-declared "Islamic State of the Caucasus Emirate," and are not as weakened as Putin would like the international community to believe. This misconception proved evident in the lead up to the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. Two female suicide bombers carried out attacks on public transportation centers in Volgograd in December 2013. These events once again reminded the Russians of the threat of domestic terrorism and the critical role women can play in that threat.

The Black Widows

Although currently marginalized and suppressed, Jihadists in Chechnya have nevertheless been able to retain a significant degree of influence by using female suicide bombers. The second Chechen war provided an ideal recruiting ground for Black Widows, many of whom lost their husbands, families, and homes during Russia's anti-terrorist campaign in Chechnya. The combination of religious and political motives, in addition to feelings of grief and the need for revenge, proved effective in persuading the women to join the Jihadist movement. It has been reported that almost half of the suicide-bombings in Russia since 2000 involved female terrorists. As of August 2013, [46 women](#) have carried out suicide bombings in Russia, culminating in 26 terrorist attacks. Accordingly, the Black Widow phenomenon cannot be attributed to a series of isolated attacks, but is instead part of a systematic plan to punish Russia for its actions in Chechnya. In this respect, the female suicide bombers involved in the Dubrovka Theater attack (2002) and the Beslan school hostage crisis (2004) have left a deep impression on Russian citizens and their views on terrorism.

But while most experts believe that the Black Widows are primarily driven by grief, the debate over their exact motivations remains complex. According to Anne Speckhard and Khapta Ahmedkova, the women who became Black Widows were deeply traumatized by the violent deaths in their families. However, trauma alone does not explain their action. Speckhard and Ahmedkova also assert that trauma had to be coupled with terror-promoting ideology espoused by an organization able to equip the women to act. Viv Groskop sees things altogether differently. She believes that [Chechnya's female martyrs](#) are more likely to be forced, blackmailed or brainwashed to their deaths. Yet, irrespective of their motivations, one fact remains constant: Black Widows always act on behalf of a rebel group. They have become an integral part of the Chechen terrorists' efforts to enact revenge on Russia.

Dagestan in focus

In many ways, for Moscow, suppressing Jihadists in Dagestan and safeguarding relative stability there has proven to be more challenging than in Chechnya. Dagestanis are mostly Sunni Muslim. However, a fundamentalist Salafist orientation has recently supplanted the traditional Sufi brand of Sunni Islam, causing serious unrest. As in Chechnya, funding from the Middle East has fuelled extreme religious movements in Dagestan, provided information on global Jihad and created close ties with the extremists in Saudi Arabia. It has effectively inspired the [Wahhabization of Islam in Dagestan](#) and created a violent schism within society.

Russia's attempts to counter extremism have merely intensified the crisis. In the early 2000s some progress was made towards creating peace between Sufis and Salafists after the Dagestan government adopted a set of softer policies towards the rebel militant groups. These focused upon the reintegration of rebel groups into society rather than hunting them down. And while such policies did not bring an immediate peace to the region, they nevertheless managed to create a dialogue

between the two religious groups. Not that this completely stopped terrorist attacks in Dagestan. In August 2012, a prominent Sufi leader and five of his followers were killed by a female suicide bomber. The murder of Said Afandi – reportedly a frequent critic of Wahabism – helped further escalate tensions in Dagestan.

According to a [2013 report](#) by the International Crisis Group, a serious shift took place in the Dagestani government's security practices following the election of Ramazan Abdulatipov as president. An intimidation campaign against Salafi religious leaders prompted many to leave public life and even the republic itself. There was also a wave of arrests and summary executions not just against relatives, acquaintances, and suspected accomplices of militants, but also Salafi believers more broadly. The Crisis Group report concludes that Moscow effectively endorsed these hardline policies because it wanted a quick solution to Dagestan's problems ahead of the Sochi Winter Olympics. Yet, many analysts have argued that the violent suppression of Wahhabis in Dagestan is only making the problem worse. In their view, Moscow should be bracing itself for an imminent eruption in the north Caucasus.

Putin walking on eggshells?

While the terrorist organizations are quite sophisticated in the northern Caucasus and are starting to spill into the southern Caucasus, Putin has had some success in using local actors in Chechnya and Dagestan to hunt them down. Arguably the most high profile local actor was Akhmad Kadyrov, a rebel leader who switched allegiances at the height of the second Chechen War before becoming president of the republic in 2003. Kadyrov's son, Ramzan, replaced his father as president in 2007, and has also become a valuable ally of Putin in the region.

Moscow's main [support for the current Chechen president](#) comes in the shape of funding for an anti-terrorist unit known as the "[Kadyrovtsi](#)". This unit undoubtedly played a major role in enforcing Putin's hardline crackdown on terrorists ahead of Sochi. Yet, while Ramzan has brought relative stability to Chechnya, this has not stopped accusations of corruption and human rights abuses that have merely added fuel to Chechen animosity towards Russia. This has, in turn, invited the kind of international scrutiny that Putin wants to avoid.

Alongside widespread international condemnation, commentators like [Fareed Zakaria](#) have poured scorn on Moscow's record in Chechnya and Dagestan. He believes that had Russia approached the Chechnya problem with less brutality and offered concessions, the opposition would have been far more manageable. Zakaria also reminds us that the Chechen rebellion was not originally a vehicle for Islamic extremism, and didn't have to turn out that way. Now, given the nature and ferocity of the terrorists it faces, Russia might not have a choice but to continue fighting fire with fire.

But that's not to say that Putin hasn't been successful in framing his actions in Chechnya as an anti-terrorist campaign. Rather than presenting [the second Chechen war](#) as Russia's fight against an autonomous republic's attempt at independence, he has been able to portray it as part of the global 'war on terror'. This paradigm shift has brought greater Western acceptance of Putin's actions in Chechnya. Moreover, commentary focused upon the [globalization of terrorism](#) via the Internet and other media resources serves as a reminder that Russia's home-grown terrorism is a problem with international consequences.

This also helps to make Putin's support for Syria's Bashar al-Assad perfectly understandable and, indeed, justifiable. More than anything, Putin fears a spillover of the Syrian crisis into Chechnya. An authoritarian regime that suppresses its own citizens is more favorable than one that could export even greater insecurity into Russia. Consequently, Moscow continues to have a vested interest in

providing financial and political support to the governments of Chechnya and Dagestan. Without the likes of Kadyrov in control, the illusion of peace in north Caucasus might once again be shattered - to the detriment of the Russian heartland.

For the time being, however, it's Russia's aggressive foreign policy agenda that continues to be a frequently discussed topic in international policy circles. Yet, it is also important to take into account its domestic issues, and in particular the ticking bomb that is the terrorism-ridden north Caucasus - arguably one of the most horrendous legacies that Vladimir Putin will leave behind.

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