

Bomb explodes in the middle of Moscow—terrorism and politics in Russia

Vladimir Volkov**21 August 2000**

The bomb explosion which rocked the centre of Moscow on August 8 has once again vividly highlighted the political instability of Russian society.

The bomb went off in one of the most populous areas of the Russian capital, Pushkin Square, and at a time of day when especially large numbers of people were passing by. Seven people died on the spot and five others died later in hospital. Over 90 people were injured, 50 of them so severely that they required hospital treatment.

The strength of the explosion is estimated at between 0.4 to 1.5 kilograms of TNT. The bomb had no outer shell but was filled with sharpened pieces of metal. According to some reports the bomb contained material which was also found in bombs which exploded last year in blocks of flats situated in the suburbs of Moscow.

Initial suspicions that the catastrophe had “technical origins” can hardly be substantiated. It is also unlikely that the bomb was a result of “conflicts between criminal elements.” As a rule such conflicts take the form of “contract killings” of certain businessmen not involving the murder of innocent bystanders. There can be little doubt that the explosion on August 8 was a deliberate terrorist act.

Many Russian politicians immediately claimed that Chechen fighters were responsible for the deed. There is no evidence, however, to support this supposition.

Moscow Mayor Yuri Lushkov declared that he is “100 percent” sure that the “traces go back to Chechnya.” His view was shared by the head of the secret service (FSB), N. Patrushev. Ultra-nationalist Vladimir Shirinovski went so far as to call for a “Bartholomew’s night for Chechens” after the explosion. On St. Bartholomew’s day in 1572, 20,000 Huguenots were murdered in France.

By the evening of the day of the explosion the vice chairman of the FSB, V. Pronitchev, announced on state radio the arrest of two Caucasian suspects—one from Chechnya and the other from Dagestan. But it could not

be proven that they were involved in the attack. The only evidence police had to implicate the two was Islamic religious literature they had on their persons.

Over the past months there have been continuous reports in the Russian media of supposed preparations for terrorist attacks by Chechen fighters on Russian territory. The latest explosion fit into this picture.

For its part, however, the Chechen leadership has denied any responsibility for what took place. Aslan Maskhadov, who was elected president of Chechnya in 1997, made this clear in a statement to the AFP press agency. The ideological centre for the Chechens, led by M. Udagov, published a report accusing the “government in the Kremlin” of being behind the Moscow explosion.

Under such circumstances one can only speculate as to who was responsible for the explosion. It is even possible that domestic opponents of Putin or forces within the government were involved.

The circumstances surrounding the bomb attacks, which devastated two blocks of flats last year with many casualties, have never been clarified. There are persistent rumours that the secret service FSB was behind the attacks, and there was even some evidence to substantiate this. A number of FSB agents were caught red-handed as they were preparing another bomb attack. They talked their way out of trouble, however, by claiming that they were just practising an exercise to test the alertness of the general population.

Vladimir Putin was able to profit from the bomb attacks at that time, as they provided him with an excuse for the war against Chechnya and for increased domestic repression. The situation is somewhat different in light of the latest bomb attack. This time it reveals the general weaknesses of Putin as well as the failure of his policies in the North Caucasus. He justified the war against Chechnya with the claim that it was necessary to eradicate this “centre of international terrorism” and so protect the

population-at-large from terrorist attacks. Now terror has returned to the heart of the capital and the war in Chechnya is claiming more and more victims, with no end in sight.

This time the reaction of the Kremlin has been more measured than last year. At that time Putin boasted that he “would crush the terrorists on the toilet.” Now, with regard to the latest events, he has warned against looking for a “national source.” He stated that criminals possess neither nationality nor creed and that it was only possible to combat “terrorism through political will.” The only medicine, he added, “is an adequate answer,” but without giving any clue of what he meant.

To a certain extent the government is paralysed in the face of the accumulated problems of Russian society. The central pillar of Putin's politics up until now—the strengthening of the secret police apparatus and the central power structures—has its limits. Such measures have done nothing to improve the living standards of society and are incapable of creating jobs or enough to eat for the population.

Putin's political rivals have detected these weaknesses and are acting correspondingly. Putin does not lack for rivals—for example the regional elites with representation in the Federal Council or the financial and industrial groups of some of the “oligarchs” who have lost their former positions. There are also influential politicians and businessmen such as Boris Berezovsky, as well as disenchanted officers of the secret service. Among such persons are certainly those capable of being able to organise a large-scale provocation such as the latest act of terror in Moscow in the hope of influencing their own interests.

The date of the attack indicates as well that it may well have been organised by opponents of Putin. The explosion took place on the eve of the anniversary of Putin's nomination as Russian prime minister. Two days after the intervention of Chechen troops in neighbouring Dagestan President Boris Yeltsin removed Prime Minister Sergei Stapachin and appointed the little known Putin to head of the Russian cabinet.

Irrespective of who laid the bomb, the explosion has served to reveal the profound weaknesses of the current government.

There is little in Putin's biography that points to any statesman-like qualities on his part. His rise to the top of the Russian state was entirely due to his manipulation of widespread fear and nationalism. He used the war in Chechnya as a means of encouraging xenophobia and

nationalist moods while, at the same time, suppressing freedom of opinion and political opposition. Up until now there is absolutely no indication that Putin has an answer to the pressing economic and social problems confronting Russia. In the long term it is not possible to counter such problems with fear and nationalist hysteria. Social reality cannot be ignored forever and in this respect things do not look good for Putin.

Since he assumed the position first of prime minister and then president there has been no improvement in living standards for the mass of the Russian population. At the same time the war in the North Caucasus has carried on without a break. Although in the spring of this year the Kremlin announced the official end of the “military stage of the anti-terror operation” there has been no let-up in fighting and casualties. Thousands of Russian soldiers and inhabitants of Chechnya have lost their lives. Virtually the entire territory of the republic of Chechnya has been destroyed. Many thousands of Chechens have been forced to flee to neighbouring Ingushetia where they are accommodated in tents and transit camps in the most deplorable conditions. They have no hope of returning to their homes or living any sort of normal life.

Under such conditions conflicts between the various groups constituting the Russian ruling class have intensified. The Kremlin is in open conflict not only with the Federal Council which brings together the diverse regional elites, but also with most of the so-called oligarchs. Bitter clashes are taking place behind the scenes.

Following the explosion of August 8 one thing, however, is clear: the result will be a further beefing up of the state apparatus, as well as the fostering of xenophobia, nationalism and violence as the means for maintaining “order” in the country.



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