

What lies behind the recent explosions in Chechnya?

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A series of powerful explosions in Chechnya earlier this month gave the lie to claims by the Russian government of Vladimir Putin and by the pro-Russian local administration of Ahmad Kadyrov that the present situation in the republic is leading to peace and the restoration of normality.

Only a few months ago, at the end of December 2002, there occurred another powerful explosion. Two trucks packed with explosives were blown up near a complex of administration buildings in Grozny. Over 80 people died and more than 300 were hurt in that incident.

Just two months ago, at the end of March, the Russian government conducted a referendum aimed at legitimising the structures of neocolonial control established during the second Chechen war. The citizens of Chechnya elected to remain within the Russian Federation in return for nominal autonomy. Not a single one of the regional problems was or could have been solved by this vote. The recent explosions have served as a reminder that the emergency regime, the general mood of hostility, and the generalised chaos within Chechnya have not diminished by comparison with the 1999-2002 period, when "constitutional peace was being reestablished."

The first of the two explosions occurred on Monday morning, May 12, in the Nadterechny region of Chechnya situated in the north of the republic and long considered a more pro-Russian region. A large truck loaded with tons of trinitrotoluene and masked with sacks of cement approached a group of administrative buildings in the regional center of Znamenskoie. The truck attempted to crash through the metal barrier blocking the roadway, but the shock detonated the explosives. Although more than 30 metres still separated the truck from the buildings, the consequences of the explosion were quite serious. Nine buildings, seven of them inhabited houses, plus buildings housing the local administration and the local security office, were damaged. Fifty-nine people were killed, and at least 200 were hurt.

Three people were in the cab of this truck, which was presumably driven from the neighbouring republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, successfully negotiating a number of roadblocks. There is continuing reconstruction in Chechnya due to its wartime devastation, and many cement trucks drive into the region from neighbouring areas. It is not impossible to either fake travel permits or bribe the soldiers at control posts.

The second explosion occurred two days later, on Wednesday morning local time. A Moslem religious service was taking place in the village of Ilaskhan-Iurt, devoted to the Prophet Muhammad and one of the Moslem preachers active during the 19th century. Over 10,000 people from Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia gathered for the ceremony. The head of the Chechen administration, Ahmad Kadyrov, who is himself a bona fide Moslem cleric was leading the prayer. As the service was finishing, a female suicide bomber approached the group of people around Kadyrov and triggered her bomb. Eighteen people, four of them Kadyrov's bodyguards, were killed, and more than 150 people were wounded. Kadyrov himself was not hurt.

Actually, there were two women suicide bombers: the 46-year-old

Shahidat Baimuradova, who exploded her bomb, and 52-year-old Zulai Abdulzakova. They introduced themselves as journalists, and the bomb was hidden inside their movie camera. Shrapnel from the first explosion fatally wounded the second woman; hence, there was only one explosion.

The first question to arise from such horrible news: What leads an average inhabitant of Chechnya to resort to such desperate actions? It is clear that, as with the situation in Palestine, the answer lies in the profound disappointment with the existing political parties and movements and the absence of any progressive social perspective.

All of this takes place within the context of continuing violence and terror by the Russian military against the civilian population. Since the end of March (i.e., after the conclusion of the referendum), over 70 abductions were committed in Chechnya, all of them attributed to the Russian military. According to one Chechen official, more than 245 Chechen citizens had disappeared since the beginning of this year.

The fact that women took part in the latest terror actions shows the breadth of dissatisfaction and the degree of desperation that pushes such varied elements of Chechen society to acts of suicidal terror.

Russian President Putin hurried to connect these Chechen explosions to the recent bombings in Saudi Arabia during Colin Powell's visit there. Putin proclaimed that both the Chechen and the Saudi attacks were the work of a single Islamic terrorist organization headed by Al-Qaeda. Russian officials simultaneously reported that about \$1 million were transferred to Chechnya before the explosions. The Kremlin's propaganda machine is trying to suggest that this money was provided by international Islamic organisations to fund the explosions in Znamenskoie and in Ilaskhan-Iurt.

We cannot, of course, exclude this possibility. Connections between the armed Chechen separatists and various international Islamic institutions have been fairly well established in the past few years. The problem lies in establishing whether such ties are strong enough to support the sort of long-range planning and organisation of these widespread operations. On the other hand, there must exist significant political motives for actions of this nature.

The more significant question is this: Does Al-Qaeda or any other Islamic fundamentalist movement require these Chechen outrages at this time?

Following the September 11, 2001, attacks, Russian president Putin decided to support the Bush administration's war on "international terrorism." The radical Islamic groups, therefore, could justifiably view the Russian regime as one of their enemies.

However, the US war on Iraq has altered the political landscape. This war significantly damaged Russia's geopolitical interests in the Middle East. Putin's administration is very frightened by the outcome of the military campaign in Iraq. Compared to France and Germany, Russia has been more reluctant to accept the American administration's demand for the complete removal of international sanctions on Iraq, which would

legitimise the US neocolonial occupation of this country, and its control of the country's oil reserves, the second largest in the world.

The recent explosions in Chechnya served to alleviate tensions in the US-Russian relationship. To some extent, Putin has rehabilitated himself in the eyes of Bush Jr. as a strategic partner. If Islamists abroad wanted to take revenge on Putin or harm his interests, they failed miserably and achieved just the reverse.

At the same time, if we take into account the role played by Chechnya in domestic Russian policies throughout the 1990s, the methods of provocations, conspiracies, and criminal combinations utilised by the Kremlin, and the geopolitical significance of Chechnya for the Russian government, then we can reasonably suppose that various influential forces within the ruling Russian elite groupings might have had an interest in seeing a new wave of bloody violence in Chechnya.

First, a new outbreak of violence in the northern Caucasus could further a long-range strategy to secure Putin's reelection in the presidential elections next year. Revelations during the last few years have established that the crisis in Chechnya was frequently utilised by the Moscow regime to impose political decisions that could not be forced upon the society in any other way.

The first Chechen campaign was started in late 1994 to organise a "small victorious war" and prop up the shaky authority of the Yeltsin government. As soon as Yeltsin was reelected in the summer of 1996, the war was stopped, even though the generals were loath to admit a military defeat, and although it seemed demeaning to the Great Russian mindset of a section of the population (the peace of Khasaviurt in August 1996).

This scenario was played out in an even more cynical and reckless manner during the opening of the Second Chechen war in the fall of 1999. In order to secure the transfer of power from Yeltsin to Putin, the Kremlin politicians (specifically, the then all-powerful oligarch and media magnate Boris Berezovsky) organised an invasion by groups of Chechen separatists into Dagestan followed by a series of bombings of houses in Moscow and Volgograd, costing the lives of 300 people. The atmosphere of fear created by these actions was used to channel popular opinion behind Putin. In March 2000, Vladimir Putin was swept into office as Russia's president on a wave of nationalist hysteria.

Additionally, suspicions about the "Kremlin's hand" are aroused by the events of last fall in Moscow, when a group of armed Chechens took about 800 people hostage in a theater. According to the story published by Anna Politkovskaia, a journalist of *Novaia Gazeta*, an agent of the Russian FSB, the secret police, infiltrated this group headed by Movsar Baraiev. This agent, according to the story, succeeded in escaping the building and surviving the government rescue assault, as a result of which 129 hostages and the whole group of about 50 Chechen militants were killed.

If this report is true (Politkovskaia published an interview with the unnamed agent, who had admitted his role in these events), then Putin's government is guilty not only of a cruel and merciless overreaction to the hostage crisis, but also of directly organising the greatest armed provocation in contemporary Russian history.

Considering these recent experiences, we cannot but conclude that if such provocations advance its fundamental interests, the Kremlin is quite capable of launching fresh acts of bloody violence and sacrificing tens and hundreds of new lives. The state of acute crisis, which had in the recent past pushed the Russian government into similar ventures, has in no sense dissipated. Any idea that under Putin the level of moral responsibility of those who make such decisions has grown would be highly superficial and naive.

Two crucial factors, one of an international and the second of a domestic nature, have combined recently to sharpen the crisis of the Putin regime.

First, the war in Iraq served to further polarise the various political forces in Russia. While one group of politicians and mainstream journalists is advocating a quick restoration of partnership with the US, another group, perhaps more numerous and influential, thinks that the conflict of interests between Russia and the US is bound to grow. This second group calls for a fundamental change in global Russian policy to give it an anti-American character, to strengthen an alliance with Europe and only pay lip service to the idea of partnership with the leader of world imperialism.

Putin is conducting a balancing act between these two forces, utilising methods of Bonapartism to preserve a semblance of consensus within the new Russian ruling elite. A rise in the tensions related to Chechnya, combined with the renewal of friendly relations with the Bush administration, would also place Putin "above" the sharpening conflict of these domestic constituencies, and would dampen the internal opposition to his foreign policy of empirical zigzags and hesitant half measures.

The other important factor has to do with the opening of the electoral campaign for the Russian parliament. The outcome of the December parliamentary election will largely determine whether Putin succeeds in getting reelected president next year. Despite the absence of any open opposition from among the influential political forces inside the country, he has no defined social or political base of support. His main supporters come from within the state bureaucracy itself, from the military and the special and secret services, as well as from sections of big business. However, all these elements are disunited, tied together only by their personal loyalty to Putin, not by any common political program.

According to numerous opinion polls, there is a huge gulf between Putin's nominally high popularity rating and the actual popular moods of the Russian electorate. For a time, this gulf was bridged by hopes that Putin would be able to overcome the worst legacies of Yeltsin's social and political regime, and that he might improve the lot of the tens of millions of average citizens. But the absence of any positive changes for the masses and the deepening of the tendencies of social breakdown, which grow organically out of the policy of restoring capitalism, make the connection between the masses of toilers and Putin ever more fragile and ephemeral. The optimistic hopes are dissipating, giving way to a frightening vision of growing social and economic catastrophe and the absence of any perspective for the majority of workers, youth and intellectuals.

Despite Putin's frequent protestations of opposition to the war in Iraq, in the eyes of Russia's toilers his regime is increasingly seen as completely dependent upon the leading world powers, and subservient first of all to the US. Putin's government is unable to stand up to the imperialist and domineering pretensions of the American ruling elite; Putin's policies objectively lead to a further weakening of the country's economy and its defence capabilities.

These conditions create the possibility for a new political force to arise quickly and fill the abyss between the ruling regime and popular aspirations. We are not discussing now the question of the political nature of this political force; what we must note is that it might wrest control of events out of the hands of the present cliques in the political oligarchy. It is to prevent such a scenario that the Kremlin strategists may have decided that a new armed outrage in Chechnya is just the thing to consolidate the nation around the existing government and its present leader.

The Kremlin's political scene, however, consists not merely of a tableau of unified and homogeneous elements supporting Putin. Rather, a number of internally warring combinations compete for influence. If one might suppose that certain groups in the top echelons of Putin's regime might resort to extensive destabilisation in Chechnya to save the authority of the current president, then other layers of the ruling elite might use the facts of such destabilisation to discredit Putin and promote their own representatives to Moscow's "throne."

First and foremost in this regard, there is the “Berezovsky factor.” Everyone is aware that this former oligarch and media magnate rose during Yeltsin’s years to become one of the leading political figures in Russia, although he never occupied any truly influential post himself. Not only did he become one of the main protagonists in the creation of a political entity that was later dubbed the “Yeltsin family”—that is, the assembly of economic and political structures that was most closely tied to Yeltsin and his immediate circle. Berezovsky also holds the title for introducing into the Russian body politic the most odious and dirty political technologies. These dirty tricks secured Yeltsin’s reelection in 1996 and promoted Putin in late 1999-early 2000.

It is well known that Berezovsky maintained contacts with leaders of the armed Chechen separatists, even during the periods of military action by the Russian army. It is a well-established fact that in 1997 he transferred \$3 million to Shamil Basaiev, one of the leading Chechen separatist field commanders, supposedly for the building of a hospital. In a recent interview, Berezovsky as much as admitted that he personally thought up the idea of organising the invasion by Basaiev’s and Khattab’s detachments into Dagestan in August 1999.

Lately, having been forced into an exile in England, Berezovsky is conducting a campaign to discredit Putin, and he is asserting that the explosions in Moscow and Volgodonsk in the fall of 1999 were organised by the FSB. However, he was at that time very close to these services and to a large extent directed their activities.

Apparently, no one knows as much about the autumn 1999 explosions as Berezovsky. Continuing to exert a great deal of influence in Russia through his agents, he can once again resort to techniques that were developed under his leadership over the course of years with the aim of regaining for himself and his associates the influence that he lost under Putin.

Putin’s entourage has already accused Berezovsky of trying to provoke mass unrest in Russia. A couple of weeks before the recent explosions, Russian newspapers published transcripts of telephone conversations that Berezovsky supposedly conducted with a number of influential leaders. In a supposed talk with the Communist Party leader Ziuganov (an alliance with the CP was proclaimed by Berezovsky as the necessary precondition for the liberals to succeed in the upcoming parliamentary elections), the exiled oligarch called on the “communist” leader to organise anti-Semitic pogroms, so as to accuse the current government of incompetence and failure to protect the citizens and preserve civic order.

Berezovsky denies any such attempts or provocations. However, the very fact that Russia’s mass media airs such scenarios and accuses certain politicians and groups of readiness to organise public riots, and that the “talking heads” on TV view such suggestions as believable, signifies that similar scenarios are indeed being hatched in some brains.

Regardless of who stands behind this latest series of explosions in Chechnya, they serve as a clear warning: Again, as in the days of Stalin, within the Kremlin there are many people ready to prepare “spicy dishes.”



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