

Putin strengthens his authoritarian regime

Vladimir Volkov
18 September 2004

The hostage drama in North Ossetia, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of schoolchildren, parents and teachers, has revealed the enormous gulf between the interests of the Russian ruling elite and the broad masses of the population. Now Russian president Vladimir Putin is using these events in a thoroughly cynical manner to rein in democratic rights, strengthen the structures of the state, army and intelligence services, and open the road to an increasingly open dictatorial regime. Long discussed plans for a “strengthening of the power verticals” are now to be put into practice.

According to these plans, the leaders of the 89 federal states comprising Russia are no longer to be voted into office, but will instead be proposed by the Russian president and then confirmed by regional parliaments. In addition, elections to the central Russian parliament (Duma) will take place solely on the basis of party lists. The existing system, whereby half the Duma deputies are elected on a constituency basis, is to be dropped. This will mean the effective exclusion from any future election of non-party or independent candidates.

In terms of foreign policy, the Putin government aims to take a tougher stance and expand its hunt for terrorists abroad. This new doctrine was formulated last week by the head of the general staff of the Russian armed forces, Yuri Baluievski, who said Russia would “employ all methods to liquidate terrorist camps in any part of the world.” This new line was later confirmed in comments by the Russian defence minister, Sergei Ivanov.

Putin argued in favour of these changes by declaring that the struggle against terrorism must become a “national task” in which the state proceeds “relentlessly” against terrorists. “One must wipe out the terrorists directly in their caves and, when necessary, also hunt them down abroad,” he declared.

In order to justify its course, the Russian government continued to deny any responsibility for the political conditions that make possible such terror attacks. Putin continues to deny any link between Russian policy in Chechnya and the latest series of terror attacks—including the criminal attack in Beslan, the explosion of two planes, and recent bomb attacks in Moscow.

His claims in this respect stand in glaring contradiction to

the fact that the Russian intelligence services have issued a reward of \$10 million for information leading to the location of Aslan Mashadov and Shamil Bassayev—thereby identifying the two leaders of the Chechen separatist movement as the organisers and ideologues behind the latest terrorist attacks.

In a discussion with Western journalists, Putin justified the brutal activities of the Russian army in the Caucasus by referring to the inevitable “costs” of the war—and then went so far as to draw direct parallels to the Iraqi prison of Abu Ghraib. “In war, terrible things take place that have their own logic,” he said.

It was necessary to understand, he continued, that the torture and humiliations carried out at Abu Ghraib were the result of the actions of individual soldiers and not a general orientation on the part of the Bush government to proceed with violence and cruelty against Iraqis who have taken part in resistance to the occupation. They are also not, he added, the result of direct commands by leading American officers.

It is no secret that since taking office five years ago Putin has used the war in Chechnya, which he reignited as part of his political campaign, to strengthen the state apparatus—in particular, the army and the intelligence services. Both were given a free hand in Chechnya to unleash a reign of terror against the native population.

In the meantime, Chechnya has been devastated. For over a decade any sort of normal life has been made impossible by the Russian secret services and army, which have terrorised the Chechen people with methods recalling those of Latin American dictatorships. Weapons-dealing and smuggling in neighbouring Georgia and adjoining regions, kidnapping and slave trading, as well as blackmail and other hardships, are part of everyday life. There is barely a Chechen family that has not suffered a casualty in the course of the war.

One new phenomenon to emerge from this situation are the so-called “black widows,” who participated in the occupation of a musical theatre last year, took part in the bombing attack on a rock concert, and also served as suicide bombers in the hostage-taking in Beslan. After years of terror, having witnessed the loss of their families, these

women have been stripped of any perspective for the future and have thrown themselves into such senseless actions.

In addition, the conflict in Chechnya has been systematically used by the Putin government to divert attention from the intensifying social crisis in Russia itself. Putin's own rise to power was accompanied by bombing attacks on high-rise blocks in Moscow in which over 300 people lost their lives. Having alleged that these attacks were carried out by Chechen terrorists, the state was unable to provide any definitive evidence to confirm this charge.

The political course laid down by the Kremlin has been supported by all of the main parties represented in the Russian parliament. The Duma has already indicated it will support the reintroduction of the death penalty, agree to further funds for the expansion of the secret services, and consent to a "tightening of the screws" on immigration. Draft laws have already been prepared aimed at punishing any attempts to organise illegal entry into the country. Other draft laws give the authorities increased powers to deal with issues relating to housing, residency and labour rights.

The Moscow city administration is also planning to introduce tougher measures aimed at "controlling" immigration. The city parliament has prepared the draft of a law that would drastically restrict entry into the Russian capital. According to those who have drawn up the draft, the city is to be closed off completely by security forces in the event of a terror threat. The entry of non-Russian nationalities into the city is to be curbed, should their proportion in relation to Russians exceed 10 percent.

Demands for intensified regulation of the Russian mass media are also increasing. Following the hostage drama in the Moscow musical theatre in the autumn of 2002, new regulations were already introduced limiting the rights of journalists to publish information, with the justification that such material could help the cause of the terrorists. Currently in discussion is a partial or even total ban of reports dealing with the victims of terrorism. This could mean a ban on any form of critical reportage of such events that had not been sanctioned by the government or intelligence forces. The recent removal of the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Izvestia*, after the paper printed pictures of the victims of the Beslan hostage crisis, was the first step towards such a ban.

The fact that these new measures are aimed at enabling the Kremlin to erect a police-state regime has been openly acknowledged by government-friendly commentators. The director of Russia's First television channel, M. Leontjev, declared: "The only way to reestablish order is undoubtedly the strengthening of the authoritarian components. There are no other means."

Such a course, however, is rejected by broad layers of Russian society. Rallies that took place in many Russian

towns at the start of this week made clear that expressions of compassion and anguish for the victims of Beslan and other terror attacks were accompanied by growing dissatisfaction with the path being followed by the Russian government.

Although the demonstrations, which were held with the active participation of the state, were designed to strengthen the hand of the government, demonstrators in many regions openly called for the resignation of leading political figures who shared responsibility for the tragic consequences of the terror attacks.

For example, at a rally in the central square in Vladikavkas, the capital of North Ossetia, a large gathering called for the resignation of the regional government and its president, A. Dsasochoy, who had refused to travel to Beslan during the hostage crisis. In order to save the clique around him, Dsasochoy promised Wednesday to insist on the resignation of all members of the government.

Criticism of the government was also made at the rallies held in Moscow on September 7. A number of demonstrators held up placards against the wall of the Kremlin that read: "We do not want to be hostages to government tyranny," and "No to war!"

On the same day, a correspondent for the web site *Gaseta.ru* reported on a placard calling for the resignation of Putin, with many participants at the rally welcoming and expressing their agreement with such a demand. As usual, such facts were dutifully ignored by the main television channels in their reports of the demonstrations.

One should not ignore the chauvinist sentiments that were also expressed at these rallies. The main mass media outlets and leading politicians are deliberately encouraging xenophobia, which, in the absence of a clear socialist alternative, increases the danger of nationalist conflicts. Reports have already emerged of anti-Caucasian pogroms in Yekaterinburg.

According to a study made by sociologists from the independent Centre for Analysis, 36 percent of the Russian population favours a change of leadership in the intelligence service FSB and in the army. A third of the population regards a change of course in the North Caucasus as necessary. Against a background of thoroughly pro-government media propaganda, this represents a significant percentage.



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