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From an Existential Threat to a Security Risk and a Conceptual Impasse: Terrorism in Russia

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Abstract

Russia's war against terrorism has now been ongoing for over a decade, however as demonstrated by the recent *terakt* in Domodedovo airport on 24 January 2011, the threat is not going away anytime soon. This article takes stock of the way in which Russia's position towards terrorism has evolved since 1999, suggesting that the threat posed by terrorism has gone from being presented as an existential threat to the Russian state and nation to something more akin to a security risk in recent years. As it appears that currently the Russian authorities are experiencing a conceptual impasse over the direction of counter-terrorism policy, the author presents a pessimistic prognosis for Russia's attempts to successfully manage the terrorism problem in the next few years.

Introduction: Contextualizing Russia's war on Terror

On 24th January 2011 Moscow was shaken by a bomb detonated in the international arrivals terminal of Russia's largest airport, Domodedovo, killing 37 and injuring dozens. This latest attack was yet another in a series of *terakts* over recent years, which have been aimed at transport infrastructure and the Russian heartland, with the slight variation that this time foreign nationals seem to have been targeted. In recent weeks, analysts have tried to make sense of this attack. In accounting for this terrorist act experts have identified numerous failures of the Russian state and its policy in North Caucasus and have sought to examine the nature of the contemporary terrorist threat within Russia. A variety of alternative responses have been advocated for preventing further attacks, which include the need for a more efficient counter-terrorist strategy, a more sound socio-economic policy in the North Caucasus region, the need for reform of the political system across the country and the elimination of corruption, and more focus on winning hearts and minds in the North Caucasus as part of the efforts to de-radicalize the local populations in this region. In essence, most commentators argue that Russia will only be able to address the threat of terrorism if it first overcomes its much broader structural, but also leadership, challenges, which have up till now ensured that Russia remains a weakened power with an increasing and growing terrorist threat inside its territory.

Russia it thus seems is suffering both from a conceptual failure to develop a comprehensive strategy for dealing with the terrorist threat on its soil, and a lack of capacity to implement such a strategy effectively. This article seeks to examine the wider conceptual failure of the Russian leadership in relation to terrorism, by placing this within the context of Russia's evolving position towards terrorism since the re-start of the second

Chechen war in 1999. It is argued that during the course of the 2000s, terrorism has been reconceptualized by the Russian authorities from an "exceptional" threat to a problem that has become the "norm" in Russian politics and merely a security "risk".

Terrorism in Russia

The terrorist bombing at Domodedovo is unfortunately not an isolated incident, but only one in a long line of terrorist attacks in Russia over the last decade. Indeed, a number of attacks have occurred in recent years, including suicide bombings on the Moscow metro on 29 March 2010, which killed 40 people and injured another 100, the derailment of the high speed train between Moscow and St. Petersburg on 27 November 2009 and 13 August 2007 and a bus bombing in Togliatti in Southern Russia on 31 August 2007. These recent attacks on transport infrastructure come on the back of the high-profile terrorist actions of the early-to-mid 2000s, in particular the infamous hostage taking operations: the Dubrovka Theatre siege in October 2002 and the Beslan school siege in September 2004.

Furthermore, in addition to these sporadic terrorist incidents across Russia, a growing and ongoing trend of insecurity and societal instability in the North Caucasus region has been evident for many years, which is often presented as the eye of the storm for domestic terrorism in Russia—a region where *terakts* have become the norm and are daily occurrences. Such situations exist to varying extents in the Republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria. In addition, societal insecurity and tension is increasingly spreading to other parts of the North Caucasus, such as to Adygeya, Karachay-Cherkessia and even Stavropol Krai, a predominately Slavic area (see RAD 93, Foxall article). Terrorist activity as well as inter-ethnic tension is therefore not diminishing but growing in Russia today and

is impacting on an ever-increasing section of Russian territory and society.

Russia's Evolving Conceptions of Terrorism from an Existential Threat to a Security Risk

Since the start of the second Chechen war in 1999, the Russian authorities have constructed the question of Russian instability as a fight against terrorism. Terrorism was cited as an explanation for a range of developments, from the restart of military campaigns in Chechnya to push back the rebel groups into Dagestan in the autumn 1999 to the way that instability across the North Caucasus region is characterized. The attempts of both Western actors and domestic groups, such as Memorial, to challenge the Russian authorities' depiction of instability by highlighting the role of issues other than terrorism, such as societal instability, human rights, police brutality or issues of governance, has failed, with the Russian leadership clinging onto this label as an all-in-one explanation.

However, this is not to say that Russia's official war on terror has not evolved during the last decade, in fact the leadership's position and construction of the terrorist threat has changed significantly, as indeed have the measures and policies put forward for dealing with it. In the initial stages of the counter-terrorist campaign in Chechnya 1999–2001, the Russian leadership securitized the terrorist threat coming out of Chechnya, by presenting it as an existential threat to both the Russian state, but also the wider international community, which was said to be originating from domestic and international Islamist inspired terrorist groups. The solution that the Putin regime advocated was large-scale security operations from autumn 1999 through to spring 2000 in Chechnya, which was said to be the heart of the terrorist threat inside Russia. This was followed by lower-scale counter-terrorist operations from the early to mid 2000s. These counter-terrorist operations were never about changing the fundamental nature of Russian politics or altering the state's security practices in response to the development of discontent within Chechnya. Instead, they were intended to strengthen the prevailing political regime and its approach to security across Russia, and specifically in areas that were perceived to be escaping from Russian federal state control. Hence, there was no consideration of changing existing norms within Russia, such as making Russia more transparent or fair to tackle disillusionment, but an emphasis on the need for a strong state in Russia by re-imposing the control of state institutions, at least in form if not in practice, and by military means if necessary.

By the mid 2000s, the Chechen issue, at least in relation to terrorism, was no longer viewed as a threat to

the survival of the Russian state. The Russian authorities argued that the immediate terrorist threat had been dealt with, and that their policy of normalizing the political and socio-economic spheres in Chechnya, in conjunction with ongoing counter-terrorist operations (under the leaderships of Akhmad Kadyrov 2000–2004 and subsequently his son Ramzan Kadyrov 2007–) were working. On the basis of the proclaimed success of this approach in Chechnya, the Russian authorities began to reinterpret terrorism as merely a "risk" to Russian security, rather than a fundamental threat to the Russian state. As part of this reinterpretation, the ongoing terrorist activity of the so-called "Caucasus Emirate", under the leadership of Doku Umarov, across the North Caucasus region and other intermittent *terakty* in other cities in Russia were said to have been conducted by the remnants of the terrorist groups that had been squeezed out of Chechnya, due to the success of the policy of normalization. The groups formerly active in Chechnya were said to have moved predominately to Dagestan, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria. In line with this reclassification of the terrorist threat, a range of new counter-terrorist legislation was enacted, such as new Counter Terrorism law in 2006 and the creation of the National Anti-Terrorism Committee with local branches throughout the Russian Federation, which it was claimed would be capable of dealing with the downgraded "risk" of terrorism through low-level operational measures.

During the second half of the Putin presidency, the Russian leadership refused to deviate from their reinterpretation of the level of threat from terrorism or their new approach. Neither ongoing criticism, from both home and abroad, over its security operations in the North Caucasus, ongoing sidelining of questions of human rights, persistent failure to adequately address socio-economic problems and issues of political governance, nor a growth in violence across the North Caucasus region, was enough to force the Putin regime to change its approach to dealing with the threat of terrorism. The disinterest of the Russian public in the question of terrorism, in comparison with their optimism about economic growth and the influx of capital into Russia during the mid-2000s, also meant that there was little popular pressure on the government to change their approach towards terrorism, as had been the case in the mid-1990s when the Yeltsin government was almost brought down by discontent surrounding the first Chechen war. Thus, during the mid to late 2000s, terrorism had essentially become a question of risk rather than direct threat, if only because it was no longer the most important issue in Russia.

Under President Medvedev (2008–), the authorities have been more forthcoming in recognizing that

the terrorist problem in Russia is more serious than previously stated. This is in part down to his project of modernization, but also because the escalating violence in the North Caucasus has become harder to ignore. In response to the deteriorating situation in the North Caucasus, a series of different measures have been adopted, such as the change of local leaderships (such as in Ingushetia), the creation of the North Caucasus region, the appointment of Alexander Khloponin as the head of this new North Caucasian Federal District (he has put forward a 15 year proposal for the economic development of the region) and ongoing counter-terrorist security operations in several of the region's Republics. Nonetheless, despite these adjustments, more or less the same approach is advocated, which centers on the need for better economic conditions, mutes the issue of political governance, and relies upon counter-terrorist operations on the ground. Whilst it is unclear whether the measures suggested by liberal critics of official counter-terrorism policy (as outlined earlier) would in practice decrease the incidents of violence in Russia, it is clear that, at least at this stage, for these more liberal strategies to be effectively put into practice, a radical overhaul of the Russian state, as well as society at large, would be necessary. Despite the rhetoric of modernization, it is also evident that the Russian authorities are not about to undertake such a major overhaul.

Most of Russia's counter-terrorist policies over the last decade, be they large scale military operations in the early 2000s or combinations of low-level counter-terrorist operations and normalization strategies build around autocratic local regimes, have centered upon avoiding any wide-scale alteration to the Russian polity or society, by seeking to implement certain adjustments to the North Caucasus region alone. However, this attempt to maintain the status quo has had unintended consequences, as seen by the increase in Russian ultra-nationalism, growing tension across the wider North Caucasus region and the restructuring of Chechnya under President Kadyrov. The Russian authorities appear to recognize that the current policy in the region has not succeeded in providing either the North Caucasus region or Russia as a whole with greater security, however the same policies continue to be recycled and re-introduced time and time again, such as the blaming of individual officials for the events in Domodedovo without a subsequent discussion of the weaknesses of the operational

aspects of the Russian state as a whole. Thus, whilst the Russian authorities appear to have reached a conceptual impasse in how they consider terrorism can be addressed a radical new solution does not appear to be on the horizon.

A problem that used to be presented as an extraordinary threat has now become the norm (i.e. a fact of everyday life) in Russia, a situation that is now not only recognized by the Russian authorities, but also the Russian public. A Levada Centre survey of opinion polls suggests that the Russian people have resigned themselves to living with terrorism. This study demonstrates that since 2005, between 50 and 60 per cent of Russians have consistently expressed the view that the situation in North Caucasus will not change. Furthermore, in a Levada opinion poll in January 2011 around 48 per cent of respondents agreed that terrorist acts have become part of everyday life in Russia, and 34 per cent agreed that the frequency of terrorist acts in Russia will remain the same in the future. More recently, Russia's foreign allies have also significantly muted their criticism, at least in public, about its counter-terrorist strategy.

Conclusion

To understand the issue of terrorism in Russia it is important to take into account the way in which the terrorist question has evolved in Russia politics over the last decade. During this time, the Russian authorities' interpretation of the terrorist threat they face has gone through the three phases: 1999–2004 securitization as a threat to the survival of the Russian state, 2004–2008 as a risk that the restored state could manage, and most recently, conceptual confusion as the regime no longer has a clear idea of how to tackle the problem. What is common to all of these periods and different views on the terrorist threat is that any attempt to address instability in the North Caucasus or the threat of terrorist incidents throughout Russia have sought to avoid any widespread restructuring of the wider Russian domestic order—the solution advocated by many experts. In spite of promises of modernization by President Medvedev, it seems unlikely that this approach to terrorism and instability will change, and hence individual responses to specific terrorist incidents will continue, with no widespread or deep-rooted strategy deployed to address instability at large.

About the Author

Aglaya Snetkov is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich. She has a forthcoming article on Russian security policy in Europe–Asia Studies, and is working on a book manuscript on the evolution of Russia's security discourse under Putin and Medvedev, as well as a project on post-Soviet regional security and Afghanistan.