



OCGG Security Section

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# Blowback - Russia needs to rethink North Caucasus

## Recommendation to the Government of Russia

by Simon Roughneen

No government should negotiate with child-killers. Without getting into any theological or ethical arguments about the relative value of one human life over another, shooting and blowing-up school-children is a step beyond the pale, a taboo that defies any attempt at dispassionate afterthought. Russian President Vladimir Putin has legitimate reasons not to negotiate with the architects of Beslan – and

has even greater reason to pursue rebels militarily.

However, this does not mean that the Russian president must ignore any openings to alter Russian policy in Chechnya – and the rest of the north Caucasus region. Years of human rights abuses, indiscriminate attacks, and abductions of those suspected of rebel connections, the cherry picking of Presidential can-

### MAIN POINTS

Chechnya's internal instability and deteriorating relations with Russia are spreading across the North Caucasus. While growing divisions inside the Chechen leadership strengthen Russia's position, it needs to resist power politics and rebuild stability in the region if it wants to avoid an unmanageable conflict .

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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didates by Moscow, flawed elections and the total absence of due process surely allow for some revision of how Russia deals with Chechnya. Perhaps even more so now given that Moscow has military control over most of the republic, bar the mountains, and has air and artillery supremacy over the rest. However, Putin, linking Russia's conflict with Chechen rebels to the international war on terror, shows no signs of revision of policy

In a televised address broadcast live on Russian TV on September 4, he said, "We have to admit that we showed no understanding of the processes occurring in our country and the world at large. We failed to act appropriately, and instead, displayed weakness. And the weak are beaten". This is worrying as it signals a repetition, perhaps in amplified form, of the failed and counterproductive iron-fist policies that have led to up to half of Chechnya's population leaving and over 200,000 fatalities, according to the most reliable estimates, since the first Chechen war in 1994-96.

Moreover, these policies have bred the killers that perpetrated Beslan – as well as the 2002 Moscow theatre siege and the spate of recent suicide attacks in Moscow. Basayev himself, though a radical Chechen nationalist in his early days,

was apparently hardened into an uncompromising terrorist leader, with unverifiable Islamist credentials, by the murder of his wife, 2 daughters and brother by Russian security forces in 1995. Much the same dynamic motivates the new wave of Chechen suicide killers, including the Black Widows, female suicide bombers avenging the deaths of fathers, brothers, husbands and lovers by blowing themselves up in metro stations and schools in Russia. A 2003 poll suggested that 69% of Chechen suicide bombers do so motivated by a desire for revenge for the brutality of Russian security forces, while only 8% thought that suicide attacks were due to either jihad or the struggle for Chechen independence.

Former Chechen President and rebel Aslan Maskhadov may or may not be implicated in the Beslan atrocity, and his protestations of innocence after the event may or not be sincere, but Beslan could lead to a split in the Chechen independence struggle as Maskhadov seeks to avoid becoming an international pariah by association with fanatics who shoot schoolchildren in the back. In a statement on the rebel website [chechenpress.com](http://chechenpress.com), Maskhadov insisted that forces under his command had nothing to do with Beslan, and added, ominously, that he wants Basayev to go on trial for his role in the siege.

A split in the Chechen rebel movement could only add to the complex patchwork of alliances and antagonists that exist and could potentially develop in the north Caucasus region. At the very least, an intra-Chechen conflict would mean offset any chance for stabilisation, which is a long way off as things stand, and could draw in other groups from nearby regions in Russia and in the south Caucasus. It would also grant Moscow the excuse it needs to maintain a heavy military presence and to postpone any meaningful attempt to settle Chechnya's status in a peaceful, legitimate and accountable manner.

Beslan was perpetrated as new Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili moved to unlock the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts in his own country. With continuing Russian support, both these regions have established de facto autonomy within Georgia since their respective duels with Tbilisi in the early 1990's, but now the Harvard-educated Saakashvili, emboldened by his reining in of the Ajara region last spring, and with the apparent tacit support of the US, attempts to recapture some of the central control over these regions.

Saakashvili's actions are unlikely to have gone unnoticed and indeed may have

played a part in the thinking of those behind Beslan. In the words of the surviving captured hostage-taker from Beslan, apparently given to Russian authorities, 'We were collected in the forest by a man who goes by the name of Colonel and told that we have to seize a school in Beslan. They told us this order was given by Maskhadov and Basayev. When we asked Colonel why we were doing this, he replied that we had to unleash war across the whole Caucasus'.

The whole Caucasus – not just Russian north Caucasus. Ambitious maybe, but the existence of the links needed to create the necessary dynamic should not be dismissed. Basayev himself began his career as a rebel in Abkhazia, aiding his fellow Muslim Abkhaz in their independence war against Tbilisi. In another classic example of blowback, akin to the US arming of the Afghan mujahideen in the war against the Soviets, Moscow apparently (though the evidence is murky) armed and supplied the Basayev rebels in 1992-3. not only did Moscow aid a man who they now place a US\$10 million bounty upon, they helped unleash the Pandora's Box of extremist forces in the Caucasus, which returned to haunt them in Chechnya, and may well have wider implications in the future.



In June this year, Chechen rebels launched a mini-invasion of neighbouring Ingushetia, resulting in nearly 100 deaths – a move which echoed the 1999 invasion of Dagestan - which was apparently aimed at drawing Dagestan into the Moscow-Chechnya conflict - and illustrated the potential for such conflict to spread across the region. Now, with Ingush implicated in the Beslan atrocity, Christian North Ossetians are publicly calling for revenge on their Muslim neighbours – while also questioning Moscow’s role as protector and ally. A potential flashpoint could be the ethnically-mixed Prigorodny region in North Ossetia, on the border with Ingushetia. The area belonged to Ingushetia prior Stalin’s deportation of the Chechen’s and Ingush in 1944. In 1992, 800 people were killed in fighting there in 1992, and thousands remain displaced.

Part of Putin’s reaction to Beslan has been to verticalise central federal control over the regions, accelerating a process that has been in train since Putin took office as Prime Minister in 1999. Parallel to his restarting of the war in Chechnya, Putin has sought to roll back to autonomy of some of Russia’s more assertive regions, which has been resisted politically up to now. After Beslan, Putin has put forward a series of far-reaching reforms including Presidential nomination of regional gov-

ernors, which have been elected locally since the formation of the present Russian state, and allowed regional potentates to govern their regions as personal fiefdoms – but with the support of their populations when it comes to dealing with Moscow.

Putin has announced the creation of a new commission to look at ways of ameliorating the socio-economic decline of the North Caucasus, which has surely contributed to dissatisfaction with Moscow’s role in and rule over the region. Putin’s predecessor as Russian President, Boris Yeltsin did likewise in 1999, and to little effect. This version will be headed by Putin’s envoy to the south Russia Federal District, one of seven superregions headed by Putin appointees who are meant to coordinate central policy toward Russia’s 89 autonomous republics, oblasts, and krais, all of which have varying degrees of autonomy. It is unclear what the blowback from these changes will be. Putin’s request to rein in the regions could prove counterproductive. Russian Muslims – even those living in the secular Volga region in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan - could see the centrist policies as threatening and eroding their hard-won autonomy that was at the core of the unwieldy compact keeping Russia together in the years after 1991.

In terms of Russia's overall social fabric, Interethnic and inter-religious relations within Russia are in serious danger of decline. Though no evidence exists of any Islamist or nationalist subversion in Muslim Russia outside the north Caucasus, erosion of Muslim autonomy and a rise in anti-Muslim sentiments in Orthodox Russian society due to terrorist incidents could create a defensiveness and siege mentality among hitherto quiescent areas. Tatarstan lies in central Russia, has no border with another state and has a secular Islamic culture. However, it was only the de facto autonomy status granted by Yeltsin in 1991 and 1994 that stopped Tatarstan from declaring formal independence from Moscow.

However, it is in the north Caucasus where violent conflict has immediate potential to spread outside Chechnya. Clearly Moscow must revise its overly-militarised policy in Chechnya – an unlikely prospect given Putin's populating of civilian positions with military and security staff and the hardening of policies that has emerged after Beslan – precisely the intention of the terrorists who seized School No 1. Moscow must also work better with Georgia in resolving the latter's frozen conflicts – particularly in South Ossetia, as any North Ossetian avenging of Beslan could have unforeseen conse-

quences for regional security, given the tangled ethnic and religious links in the region, and the intricate cross-border criminal networks throughout the whole Caucasus. Finally, Moscow must face up to the reality of the problems besetting the region and cease playing to the gallery by highlighting the role of foreign extremists over indigenous issues such as socio-economic stagnation, limited democracy, corruption and unmet nationalist aspirations.

Currently the various regional levels tend to deal directly with Moscow on a unilateral level, more than they interact with each other, even when the ostensibly natural thing to do is to work as a region – be that politically or economically. One thing Moscow could do is to foster and encourage regional economic cooperation and some level of political engagement across the North Caucasus – that is not threatening to Russia as federation. Secondly, Moscow should take the lead role in assessing the current geopolitical reality in the Caucasus as a whole, given that de jure borders do not reflect de facto reality of control on the ground. This process would require international involvement in order to guarantee the interests of the smaller Caucasian states – with the OSCE, EU and US all taking part directly. Thirdly, Moscow needs to address



the growing ethno-religious divisions emerging in Russian society, rather than merely bring Muslim republics more directly under its own thumb, which will aggravate an already deteriorating situation. More immediately, however, Russian policy toward Chechnya must be revised. A sincere and accountable conflict transformation process needs to be set in motion based on common interests of both sides – that would ensure at least an autonomous Chechnya within Russia and take the first steps toward normalising Chechen society.

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