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Russia's Choices in the North Caucasus after the Attacks in Volgograd

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Two explosions in Volgograd, as well as bombings in Dagestan, a month before the Olympic Games in Sochi, resulted in a drastic increase in the control of public buildings across Russia. In the long term, the effect of these events will be the further extension of the powers of the special services, resulting in limitations of rights and freedoms. In the case of the republics of the North Caucasus, it will mean abandoning any dialogue with the Islamic radicals and building a police state like that already functioning in Chechnya.

Explosions in Volgograd (29 and 30 December 2013), as a result of which 34 people died, shocked Russian society and rekindled the debate on methods of combating terrorism. Some Russian politicians, experts and journalists stress that "liberals" are to blame, meaning those who want to restrict the police forces and special services. Others simply point to the incompetence of the authorities in the sphere of combating terrorist threats. Among the first proposed actions were stiffer penalties for terrorists (including the death penalty), and the restriction on the right of the media to publish information about terrorists and their activities. A public discussion about the nature of Islam began again. Some columnists try to fight the stereotype that terrorism is an inherent feature of this religion and its followers from the Russian North Caucasus. However, there are also opposing voices, which influence the growth of xenophobia among ethnic Russians, and hostility towards migrants from the North Caucasus republics.

There is no conclusive evidence linking the Volgograd attacks with a jihadist underground from the North Caucasus. According to media reports, the perpetrator of one of them was supposed to be an ethnic Russian, Pavel Pechonkin, who, had operated within a militant group in Dagestan since the spring of 2012. Regardless of the veracity of this information, we can assume with reasonable certainty that those responsible for the attacks are jihadists ideologically bound to the Doku Umarov's Caucasus Emirate. This self-styled "emir," a former fighter for the independence of Chechnya, now seeks to build an Islamic state in the region. In the summer of 2013, Umarov called on his supporters to launch activities aimed at derailing the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic Games, planned for February.

The Activities of the Caucasus Emirate Militants. Umarov guerrillas, however, have little chance to act in a region where the Olympics will be held—separated by a cordon of security forces from the rest of the country. Militant attacks aimed at the police, local authority representatives and Muslim clergy loyal to the state are frequent in the Northern Caucasus Federal District, which includes the republics inhabited by Muslim Caucasian peoples, especially in Dagestan. On December 30 there was a bomb attack on a police car in Dagestan's Khasavyurt. A day later, in an explosion in the same republic, an employee of the prosecutor's office was killed.

However, terrorist actions also bring considerable losses among members of the underground, systematically killed by Russian security services. The family members of the militants are also subject to repression. Under the new rules, they are responsible financially for any losses resulting from terrorist actions carried out by their relatives. The jihadist insurgency, composed of small units, is not a serious military force. The attacks in Volgograd are no more than propaganda successes for the North-Caucasian jihadists, and have not weakened Russian federal control of the region.

Towards the Chechen Model. The need to ensure security during the Olympics had already been used as a pretext for increasing the power of the authorities in the republics of the North Caucasus, even before the Volgograd attacks. This process was accompanied by a change in leadership, initiating a new policy (in Dagestan and

Kabardino-Balkaria). Withdrawal from dialogue with the jihadist underground is apparent, as is a return to military force as the sole method of dealing with militants (in Ingushetia). Speaking after the attacks in Volgograd, Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Republic of Chechnya, stressed the need to be ruthless in the fight against terrorists, just as he had done in his authoritarian republic. Chechnya became a model for the Kremlin in the North Caucasus. The price of the effective suppression of Islamist insurgency by Kadyrov is a significant reduction in the federal centre's control over the republic, and the growing autonomy of the Chechen leader.

The leaders of the republics of the North Caucasus are not directly elected, and in fact not controlled by elected bodies or by society as a whole. The Kremlin guarantees subsidies from the federal budget, for Kadyrov and other leaders of the republics of the North Caucasus, which is key for the economy of the region (in the case of Chechnya, 12 billion rubles for socio-economic development in 2012). This reinforces primarily the leaders' personal political positions and, to a lesser extent, translates into an improved financial situation for the inhabitants of the region.

The Volgograd bombings are a good excuse for both the Kremlin and the local North Caucasian leaders to further increase the prerogatives of the authorities and restrictions of civil liberties. It seems that the federal authorities are ready to continue extending the autonomy of the leaders of the Caucasian republics to an extent resembling the Chechnya model. However, the federal government will not seek reforms reducing corruption and organised crime among the Caucasus ruling elites. This stems from the recognition that the current model (fully operational in Chechnya) fulfils its function of ensuring the main goal—stabilisation of the region.

The Future of the North Caucasus. However, the status quo (with a tendency to strengthen the ruling elites in the republics at the expense of society's control over governments), does not solve the problem of the jihadist underground. The main driving force behind the popularity of this movement is the lack of prospects for young people living in the Northern Caucasus, as well as any legal, public form of opposition to the corrupt and authoritarian rule. So we can expect further escalation of the activities of the fighters, whose ranks are still supplemented by the new volunteers, also from other regions of Russia outside the North Caucasus.

Events in Volgograd will also have an impact on the social and political situation in Russia. Checks on travellers have been intensified—and not just in Volgograd. The authorities may also try to increase control over migration, limiting the influx of residents of the North Caucasus into Russia's other regions. This in turn will lead to a significant increase in security force personnel.

Further tightening of anti-terrorist legislation should also be expected. In fact, it already happened, in November 2013, when the penalties for terrorist activities were increased, with the introduction of a penalty of up to 10 years in prison for participating in terrorist activities. Moreover, a further extension of liability to include a terrorist's family for damage caused by acts of terrorism is likely (mostly in terms of financial liability), as is an increase in the powers of the special services to conduct anti-terrorist operations.

Further restrictions of the freedom of all Russian citizens, including limitations to the freedom of the media in the name of the fight against terrorism and extremism in a very broad sense, should be expected.

Recommendations for the European Union. European Union police cooperation with Russia should be extended. Individual EU countries and international police units should support Russia in prosecuting terrorists and searching for links between the groups operating on the territory of Russia and beyond. They can also share their experiences with Russia, to protect the means of transport (such as trains and planes), which are particularly vulnerable to attacks.

Such activities must, however, be carried out with caution, in order to ensure that they do not abet the Russian special services in carrying out actions directed not at terrorists, but at opposition—especially at those opposition members who are granted asylum or reside on the territory of the EU. The European Union should, in talks with Russian authorities, emphasise that, although the fight against terrorism is necessary, it cannot be pursued at the expense of the rights and freedoms of citizens, and in particular it should not restrict the activities of the opposition or of the media.

If necessary, the EU should offer Russia help for the victims of terrorist attacks, for example, by offering specialised treatment in EU countries.