



**Beslan -
Lessons Learned?**

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Key Points

- * In some respects the tragedy in Beslan is comparable to that of 9/11, especially in the radical changes to Russia's security posture as a consequence.
- * During the siege, the Russian authorities on the federal and local levels made several serious mistakes, which included allowing inexperienced civilians to conduct negotiations, not setting up effective perimeter control and failing to control local armed volunteers. Those who cooperate with Russia's organisations combating terror will have to take this experience into account.
- * At this stage Russia's allies should not be alarmed by its radical legal and security reforms moving the country towards illiberal democracy, but
- * Russia's methods of combating terrorism may complicate its relations with some countries.

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Beslan – Lessons Learned?

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Beslan & 9/11

The attack on School Nr1 in Beslan cannot be compared to the tragic events of 9/11 in terms of the number of victims or economic fallout. However, the shock experienced by the American public can be compared with that experienced by the Russians. Like the US after 9/11, Russia is a different country after Beslan. Like the US, Russia has started its own antiterrorist crusade. It may not be as well funded, technologically advanced or efficient, but it is equally uncompromising.

The Course of Events

The Taking Over of School Nr 1

The Beslan tragedy began on 1 September 2004 at 0930 local time, and ended in a chaotic fire fight on 3 September. The occupation of the school was the culmination of a brief but bloody period in a long terrorist campaign. The terrorist attacks in 2004 had included the killing of the Chechen leader Akhmad Kadyrov on 9 May 2004, and an attack by 12 terrorists on the Ingush town of Nazran in June 2004, which claimed 16 dead.¹ On 24 August two female terrorists destroyed two airliners in separate suicide attacks, killing 90 people. On 31 August, a suicide bomber killed 10 people at a Moscow metro station. From 4 September 1999 to 1 September 2004, the number of people killed in Russia in such attacks, not counting terrorists, was 1,005.² Even before the terrorist take over of School Nr1 in Beslan it looked as if the Russian authorities were not winning the war on terrorism.

The terrorists chose School Nr 1 because that is where the Osetian elite sends its children. The gunmen were stopped on the way to Beslan by Sultan Gurazhev, a police major, who found the presence of a small caravan of a military-type lorry, GAZ-66, accompanied by a UAZ - a Russian jeep - in the early morning, on a side road, unusual.³ He was taken hostage by the terrorists, who 'confiscated' his Zhiguli car, but escaped when they were unloading their wares in front of the school. He was the first person to alert the local authorities about the unfolding events.⁴ It seems that all the weapons used by the terrorists were brought in the two utility vehicles.

The gunmen were well prepared for the siege and had learned their lessons from other operations. They placed several snipers and watchers in the school buildings, installed eight remote control surveillance cameras, brought gas masks with them and were taking medicinal substances to keep themselves alert. Russian forensic scientists described these as "like heroin and morphine", which allowed a section of the Russian media to describe the gunmen as drug takers.⁵

Twenty seven pupils, in two separate groups, escaped from the school immediately after the takeover.⁶ From the beginning the terrorists aimed at terrorising the children, their families and the Russian authorities. They executed a number of men whom they judged to be most likely to offer resistance.⁷ The terrorists pushed children through closed windows, refused to allow them and the adults to use toilets and forced them to drink their own urine. Some hostages said later that on one or two occasions some terrorists had allowed hostages to use toilets or splash their faces with tap water but threatened even the children with assault rifles when they attempted to drink.⁸ The hostage takers announced that they were going to kill 50 children for every fighter killed and 20 for every wounded one.⁹

Not all the hijackers knew from the outset that they were to take children hostages. The leader of the group described later by the Russian media as Ruslan Tagirovich Khuchbarov (32), nicknamed "Colonel", shot one of his subordinates when he objected to the holding of children, and warned the others that he was ready to shoot any of them at the slightest sign of insubordination.¹⁰ Khuchbarov later blew up the only two female members of his team, either because they grumbled about the way the children were treated or as a warning to other hostage takers.¹¹

The Hostage Takers' Demands

The terrorists' first demands, delivered on a scribbled piece of paper, on 1 September, were not those prepared by their masters. They were either a spin-off operation, concocted by the group, to test the authorities' reaction, or an attempt to show that their plan was running smoothly because they had no idea then when they would receive or be allowed to pass authorised demands. These demands, or the permission to release them, would be given by phone, and this is why, from the beginning, the terrorists made obvious how important the mobile telephone network was for them by threatening to start shooting hostages if the authorities disconnected the mobile telephone system in Beslan.¹² Vladimir Putin's adviser Aslanbek Aslakhanov said in an interview that the terrorists had numerous telephone conversations with people abroad.¹³

The terrorists' first demands were delivered in a note thrown out of the window almost immediately after they gained complete control of the school. They demanded the withdrawal of federal troops from Chechnya, the release of the terrorists caught in Ingushetia and declared themselves ready to talk only to the North Osetian President Aleksandr Dzasokhov, the President of Ingushetia Murat Zyazikov, Putin's adviser Aslakhanov and Leonid Roshal, a children's doctor, a mediator in the talks with the terrorists who took over the Nord-Ost theatre in October 2002.¹⁴ The gunmen wanted the four mediators to appear in front of them at the same time. Russian officials began to suspect that the terrorists planned to kill the four as a part of a spin-off mission. (Their views must have been confirmed when the organizer of the takeover, Shamil Basayev, later described Dr Roshal as an FSB stooge.¹⁵) One of the Deputy Ministers of Interior was even ordered to arrest Dzasokhov if he attempted to approach the school. The Russian HQ could not originally believe that the group which had quite evidently planned the whole operation well, had delivered their demands on a scribbled untidy note, and they were not treated seriously.¹⁶

Next morning, the gunmen were still waiting for instructions.¹⁷ Their "official" demands were given to the only negotiator the hostage-takers agreed to talk to, Ruslan Aushev, a hero of the Afghan war and the former president of Ingustetia. On 2 September, Aushev convinced the gunmen to release 26 women and children under the age of two. Aushev took away a letter with their demands addressed to

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Vladimir Putin. They expected a response from Moscow at the latest by the morning of 4 September.¹⁸ Several demands in the letter were leaked to the Russian media and Shamil Basayev, the organiser and paymaster of the takeover, confirmed their authenticity by releasing them on 17 September through the Chechen run Kavkaz-Tsentr website based in Lithuania, subsequently closed down by the Lithuanian authorities. In his message which the website showed as signed on 30 August 2004, Basayev took responsibility for the attack on the Beslan school, claiming that the group Riyadus-Salikhin, responsible for several terrorist operations, had carried out the attack. The Chechen warlord insisted that the hostages began to die only when the federal forces stormed the building. He accepted responsibility for the August explosions on the two airliners and in the Moscow metro station. He even agreed to take responsibility for previous explosions in Moscow and Volgodonsk “for the sake of business”.¹⁹

Basayev demanded the immediate withdrawal of the federal troops from Chechnya and Putin’s resignation. All hostages, including children, were to go on hunger strike in support of the terrorists’ demands. He also set a number of conditions which the Russian authorities were to adhere to. The hostages were to be given water, if Putin immediately ordered a stop to the war, sent all the federal troops to their barracks and subsequently withdrew them from Chechnya. The hostages were to be given food only when the troops began to withdraw from Chechnya. Children younger than 10 were to be released as soon as the federal troops started withdrawing from mountainous areas. This contradicted the final condition, in which Shamil Basayev promised to save all the children and take the other hostages to Chechnya if Vladimir Putin submitted his resignation. The other hostages were to be set free after the completion of the withdrawal.

In return Shamil Basayev promised:

- Not to strike military, political or economic deals with anyone against Russia,
- Not to have foreign military bases in Chechnya,
- Not to support or finance groups fighting the Russian Federation,
- To join the CIS,
- To stay in the rouble zone,
- To sign the Collective Security Treaty,
- That all Russia’s Muslims would refrain from armed struggle against the Russian Federation, “at least for 10-15 years”, if freedom of religion were respected.

He listed the ethnic composition of the team who took part in the attack on the school and listed his “operational” expenses in dollars and euros.²⁰

Preparing For The Worst Was Not Good Enough

The operational HQ had been set up near School Nr 1, in the Technical School Nr 8. It was headed by the President of North Osetia, Aleksandr Dzasokhov.²¹ The head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), Patrushev, and Minister of Internal Affairs Nurgaliyev arrived in Beslan several hours after the gunmen took over the school. At this point the Russian power structures were convinced that there were only 17 terrorists.²²

The involvement of local politicians in what should have been a security operation was a mistake, although considering the regional sensitivities it was a situation Moscow was probably not unhappy to accept. However, Aleksander Dzasokhov and local leaders were not able to control the desperate and armed local men. Neither

could they count on the local police or armed volunteers, who were too close emotionally to the local population and not trained for this type of operation.

In the ideal worst-case scenario the two anti terrorist teams from the Special Purpose Centre of the FSB, "Alfa" and "Vympel", would have assaulted the school only if no other solution was possible and the terrorists began to kill the hostages. The two FSB teams would have received close support from the Ministry of Internal Affairs' anti-terrorist unit "Vityaz", which would have served as their back up team and a filter for unexpected outside interference coming from the porous inner perimeter which should have been controlled by the federal OMON (Special Purpose Militia Detachment) troops. In theory there were two perimeters. The external perimeter was manned by the 58th Army and the local police force. The inner perimeter, much too close to the school, was a chaotic mixture of a security cordon and operational teams, including untrained and undisciplined local volunteers. However, establishing such a perimeter in Beslan would have been almost impossible. The local police could not have been counted on and outside forces would probably have had violent clashes with relatives of the hostages. Yet ostensibly elementary measures were not taken: some of the inhabitants of Beslan living in the houses around the school were not moved to other locations.

The gunmen tried to provoke divisions between the federal and Osetian officials in the operational HQ by trying to convince the locals that they should form a human shield around the school.²³ As a result of the shortage of trained and reliable OMON troops, in place of a trained security cordon was an undisciplined, armed and desperate crowd of local volunteers and policemen. The local population was afraid of the strong arm tactics of the federal forces. State Duma Deputy and a former head of the operations department of the "Vympel" team Aleksander Yermolin claimed in a radio interview that the local civilians told the special purpose troops that if they were to start an assault on the school, they would be shot in the back.²⁴ And it was the armed local volunteers surrounding the school who triggered the mayhem in the early afternoon of 3 September.

Vladimir Putin sent mixed signals from the beginning. On 1 September he was quoted as saying that Russia would "counter terrorism consistently and severely – as much as necessary".²⁵ The next day at his meeting with Jordanian King Abdallah II, Putin said that "the main thing in the Beslan siege is to save people's lives".²⁶ Valeriy Andreyev, the head of the FSB for North Osetia, said the same day that "There is no alternative to a dialogue".²⁷ Two days later, during his visit to Beslan, the Russian president said that that the use of force had not been considered.²⁸ The FSB was also against any use of force.²⁹ This may have been the reason why the Special Purpose Centre had no stand-by teams when the shooting started. However, the monthly *Spetsnaz Rossii*, an open source publication close to the Russian special forces, insisted that the Special Purpose Centre had stand-by teams throughout the siege.³⁰ Some witnesses claim that the two FSB assault teams Alfa and Vympel joined the fire fight only after about 30 minutes.³¹

The Shootout

On 3 September, just before 1300 Moscow time, the terrorists accepted the need to remove the bodies of those they had killed on 1 September. They allowed four officials from the Emergencies Ministry to approach the building to fetch 21 bodies. The official version presented to President Putin by Prosecutor General Ustinov says that the terrorists then began to change the system of explosives and triggered an uncontrolled explosion. This provoked panic among the hostages and the terrorists began to shoot at them.³² This version is not confirmed by witnesses. The shoot-

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out began several minutes after the four officials approached the school and when one of the terrorists assisting in collecting the 21 bodies saw an infantry vehicle and local armed volunteers. He ran back to the school, certain that the federal forces had started the attack. The volunteers then began to shoot after him and the terrorists returned fire.³³ Another witness claimed that someone had probably tripped a wire attached to explosives and a group of armed volunteers either panicked or decided to storm the building.³⁴ Some of the survivors said that the explosion which triggered the battle took place when a mine taped to the ceiling peeled off in the heat and exploded on impact.³⁵ This theory however does not explain the second explosion. Either the armed volunteers panicked, admittedly after two explosions, or they were ordered to open fire and so far no one who gave such an order can be found.

Looking at the number of dead and wounded, there is no doubt that the terrorists made no effort to spare the children. In some cases they did not defend themselves but tried to kill as many hostages as possible.³⁶ The gunmen positioned on the upper floors shot at children trying to escape from the school after the first explosion.³⁷ An unnamed officer of the Russian Special Purpose Centre who took part in the operation said that the terrorists threw many hand grenades indiscriminately, occasionally specifically aiming at hostages.³⁸ The terrorists fired a “Shmel” grenade launcher with an air-fuel warhead five times and used RPG-26 and RPG-7 rocket launchers. They also used an AGS-17 grenade launcher.³⁹ The fighting ended after midnight, when the last terrorist was killed.

The Dead, The Wounded & The Missing Terrorists

In the morning after the battle, the main government controlled TV station, ORT, reported that 250 hostages died in Beslan. 531 people were hospitalised, 283 of them children, of whom 93 were in a serious condition. Lev Dzugayev, the press secretary of the North Ossetian President, announced on the same day that 322 people were killed and more than 700 injured. He later amended the number killed to 330. Of those wounded he said 59 were gravely wounded; 12 of them died in hospitals within the day after the battle.⁴⁰

The following morning the number of hostages killed was reported to be 333. Several hours later the Interfax news agency reported 338 killed.⁴¹ This figure was accepted as the immediate post battle official casualty number. Some agencies reported higher figures. For example, the French AFP reported 394 killed, on 6 September.⁴² These, still semi-official, figures include hostages, special forces troops, a policeman whose body was probably among the 21 corpses the hostage takers allowed to be removed before the tragedy, and Emergencies Ministry officials. However, casualties among storming volunteers, local policemen and medical personnel have not been announced, although according to unconfirmed reports two FSB officers and 15 policemen were also killed in the battle.⁴³ They could have been among the bodies reported by AFP. The FSB Special Purpose Centre lost 9 officers and 1 NCO, the largest loss in the history of the unit. Thirty officers and NCOs were wounded, 10 of them seriously.⁴⁴

Even the number of terrorists killed or imprisoned does not seem to match. Officially, the bodies of 30 terrorists, two of them women, were found after the battle.⁴⁵ The only official survivor was Nur Pashi Kulyayev, one of two brothers taking part in the operation. He was described as willing to talk to the authorities⁴⁶ and judging by his brief TV appearance he was ready to say anything to please his jailers. Deputy Prosecutor-General for the Southern Federal District Sergey Fridinskiy said on 6 September at a meeting in Vladivakaz that 30 hostage-takers'

bodies had been found, one fighter had been captured and one had been blown up in an explosion⁴⁷ although three days after the battle he must have known that the terrorist who “died in an explosion” was beaten to death by a mob – so much for a secure perimeter.

Prosecutor General Vladimir Ustinov announced on 14 September that there were 32 attackers, of whom 30 were killed in the fire fight or died in explosions. One terrorist was torn to pieces and one, Nur Pasha Kulyayev, survived. Of the 31 dead terrorists 14 bodies had been identified although their identification was not yet definite.⁴⁸ This announcement contradicted the statement made on 4 September by General Andreyev, the regional head of the FSB, that three terrorists had been captured alive.⁴⁹ In the statement issued through the Kavkaz-Tsentr, Basayev claimed that 33 “fighters” took part in the Beslan siege.⁵⁰

The intensity of the battle is evident considering the number of victims, but the odds facing the Russian law enforcement teams once the fire fight began are even clearer when the hardware brought in by the terrorists is examined. Defence Minister Ivanov said in a televised interview that the engineering troops involved in clearing the mines at the school defused 127 home-made explosives.⁵¹ Other sources say that military engineers found about 50kg of unexploded ammunition in the school and that an unspecified amount of TNT burnt out without exploding.⁵² The law enforcement agencies found in the burned down school 37 assault rifles, three machine guns, five grenade launchers, five fuel-air grenade launchers, 27 grenade launcher rounds, seven pistols, 2,000 pieces of small arms ammunition, 11 grenades, 6 explosives and other weapons and ammunition.⁵³

The Aftermath

Disinformation, Misinformation or Simple Chaos

Considering the well planned assault, the nature of the target, the age and the number of hostages, the unrealistic demands of the hostage takers as well as their extreme and consistent brutality, the Russian authorities faced an impossible task. They could have done better mainly by establishing a more distant and more secure perimeter. Only then would one have been able to speculate whether other measures taken by them were adequate. Another area where they failed visibly was in information management. Too many badly briefed officials were allowed to provide speculative or glaringly inaccurate information to the media, both Russian and foreign, undermining the authorities’ already shaken credibility even further and provoking speculation.

The number of hostages officially announced during the first two days of the siege was unrealistically low. The inhabitants of Beslan were convinced that the authorities were trying to lower the number of hostages to artificially reduce the number of future casualties. This type of school combines primary and secondary education, which in Russia means ten academic years. In the third academic year alone there were 95 children.⁵⁴ Then there were the teachers, administrative staff, parents and relatives accompanying younger children. The original figure of 354 hostages quoted by the authorities was purposefully misleading. Duma Deputy Dimitri Rogozin, who found himself accidentally “embedded” in the operational HQ in Beslan, said that the first witness who escaped from the hostage takers gave the number of hostages as about 800. This figure was later brought down by other witnesses and representatives of special services.⁵⁵ No one was able to explain later on the basis of what calculation 800 had been reduced to 354.

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Equally puzzling was the authorities' preoccupation with the terrorists' ethnic composition, especially taking into account the ethnic tensions in the region. The number of Arab fighters was taken out of thin air. Head of the FSB for North Osetia General Valeriy Andreyev said during the mopping up operation that among 20 terrorists killed 10 were from "the Arab world".⁵⁶ His description of one of the dead terrorists as a Negro (*Negr*) sounded like a racist outburst.⁵⁷ Putin's adviser Aslambek Aslakhonov and President of North Osetia Dzasokhov said that there were 9 terrorists from Arab countries among the dead terrorists.⁵⁸ Shamil Basayev announced in the statement released on 17 September that there were 2 Arabs among the hostage takers, in addition to twelve Chechen men, two Chechen women, nine Ingush, three Russians, two Arabs, two Osetians, one Tatar, one Kabardin and a Guran, an ethnic group inhabiting the Baykal area.⁵⁹ The Russian law enforcement bodies probably mistook papers written in Arabic found on some of the dead terrorists for identity documents and tried to score quick and cheap propaganda points.

It was much more difficult for the Russian authorities to establish the number of hostages after the battle. Traumatized and ill, those who were not seriously wounded wanted to go home and refused to have anything to do with the authorities. The teacher committee of Beslan published a list of 1,345 names after visiting students' homes. The committee said that the list might be even longer, as not all visitors who accompanied children on 1 September were identified,⁶⁰ but this appears to be the semi-official final number. The Prosecutor General's Office unofficially put the number of hostages at 1,156 people.⁶¹ The Education Ministry of North Osetia put the number at 1,181.⁶²

The bad handling of the media by the Russian authorities - something which those working with Russia will have to bear in mind in the future - resulted in unjustifiable accusations of censorship and governmental manipulation. Yet had they been more firm and consistent they would have been accused of dictatorial practices by those who criticised them for lack of firmness and consistency. True, when Duma Deputy Dimitri Rogozin, at the operational HQ in Beslan, demanded the government's resignation during his interview with the government controlled TV network ORT, his demand was deleted from his interview.⁶³ The printed media, however, published many articles critical of the Russian authorities. There is no evidence that President Putin put pressure on any media organisations, although it appears that some of the media magnates attempted to put pressure on "their" editors in an outburst of unsolicited servility.⁶⁴

Another victim of the Beslan tragedy is Russia's fledgling liberal democracy. Criticism of the authorities voiced publicly by several liberal democrats was rarely to the point and the solutions they offered correspondingly unrealistic.⁶⁵ The western media too frequently repeated their criticism without attempting to examine their content. Those equating anti-terrorist operations in today's Russia with those in Yel'tsin's era were particularly misleading. Their unequivocal criticism of the antiterrorist operation in the Nord-Ost theatre siege presented a distorted picture of the event by suggesting that a well planned, large scale hijacking might conceivably have a happy ending.⁶⁶

What Were The Terrorists' Aims?

President Putin said after the end of the siege that the aim of the terrorists was to blow up (*vzorvat*) the North Caucasus.⁶⁷ This was probably the case. The scribbled note passed by the terrorists to the authorities on the first day of the siege, which included a demand that Chechen prisoners accused of taking part in an attack in

Ingushetia earlier in 2004 should be released, was probably their own initiative. In his version published by Kavkaz-Tzentr on 17 September, Shamil Basayev claims that his fighters have never demanded that someone should be released from prison.⁶⁸ His own demands were unrealistic. Most of the hostage takers probably did not know the content of the letter delivered to the Russian authorities by Ruslan Aushev. Basayev had practically condemned the hostage takers to death before he sent them to Beslan, hoping that their operation would end in a bloodbath, triggering an interethnic war in the North Caucasus.

More Money For Security Reforms

In his first televised speech after the end of the Beslan siege, Vladimir Putin admitted that the authorities underestimated the complexity and the danger of the processes taking place in Russia and in the world. "We showed weakness. And the weak are hit⁶⁹ ... We stopped paying attention to issues of defence and security and allowed corruption to strike at the judicial and law enforcement spheres." He promised a new system for coordinating all forces in Chechnya.⁷⁰

The \$10m reward for Shamil Basayev may not bring a result – because he is surrounded by people devoted to him and because of fear of retribution – but the increased defence and security budget may have an effect. In 2005 Russia will spend at least 27% more on combating terrorism and on national security. The law enforcement bodies will get 398.4 billion roubles and the Russian MOD 529.1 billion. The enforcement agencies will also receive an additional 6bn roubles and the MOD 14.7 bn roubles with 3bn roubles extra for combating terrorism, before the end of 2004.⁷¹

The reforms of the special services which began in August 2004 and aimed at making them leaner and meaner will continue. The special services will now be allowed to be meaner, although they will not have to become leaner for a while. All security and intelligence organisations can expect to be better funded, better equipped, more closely scrutinized and better coordinated. They will all attempt to increase their activities in the North Caucasus, which considering the close knit communities in the area will be very difficult.

Sergey Ivanov, Russia's Defence Minister, said that by the end of 2004 there will be no conscripts in Chechnya, and a first-year private serving in Chechnya will be paid 15,000 roubles a month.⁷² The army will be forced to cooperate more closely with other power organisations operating in the region. This has not been an easy process, although the common KGB roots of Sergey Ivanov, Minister of Defence; Rashid Nurgaliyev, Minister of Internal Affairs and the head of the FSB Nikolay Patrushev may help at the ministerial level in Moscow.

Vladimir Putin will now control military and security operations in the North Caucasus through Dimitriy Kozak, the new presidential plenipotentiary in the Southern Federal District and the head of the new special federal commission for the North Caucasus.⁷³ Kozak will be in charge of 13 regional anti-crisis HQs tasked with coordinating the power structures combating terrorism in the region. Each region now has a senior antiterrorist officer on attachment from the Interior Ministry (MVD). These officers also have the position of first deputy heads of the regional antiterrorist commissions. The civilian heads of the regions chair these commissions. Each senior officer is to have 70 special forces troops at his disposal.⁷⁴

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Each commission has an operational management group. These groups coordinate the antiterrorist activities of the local outposts of the power structures under their jurisdiction. They have considerable freedom to take decisions in case of a terrorist attack and will not have to wait for Moscow's orders. Giving the MVD such an important role in combating terrorism, especially in the most volatile part of Russia, is a risky strategy because, to succeed, the Minister of Internal Affairs will have to reform and purge the ministry, for which, even in the present atmosphere he has no funds or, more important, time.

Pampered by Boris Yel'tsin, inadequately supervised but playing an increasingly important role in the anti-terrorist campaign, the MVD is still ridden with corruption, in spite of the strenuous cleansing efforts of Gen Nurgaliyev and his predecessor, Boris Gryzlov. Individuals in the police structures in the North Caucasus, linked by ethnic and family connections, have been known to cooperate with terrorists. The Chechen law enforcement bodies suspect that Chechen police still have about 100 clandestine terrorist collaborators.⁷⁵

Lack of professionalism and corruption among MVD officers also helped Chechen terrorists in the past. Corruption at various level of state and local administration is rampant. For 1,000-2,000 roubles a 6-month temporary registration can be bought in Moscow. A migration card for foreign nationals costs 900 roubles and \$750 buys permanent residence in Moscow.⁷⁶ The law enforcement organisations will also have to look at car sales and the registration and identity papers industry. Modernisation of identity papers and their much tighter control will have to be speeded up if the anti-terrorist struggle is to succeed. At the moment the first machine readable passports are to be introduced in Russia only in 2006.⁷⁷

President Putin and his team will now be tempted to micromanage security and law enforcement bodies at both the strategic and local levels. That will not please liberal democrats but it could help combat terrorism. His most difficult task will be to change the working methods of the 50+ generation of Russia's security and law enforcement officers, who, like Putin, began their careers in the effective but inefficient Soviet security and law enforcement organs and then experienced a demoralising decade. Were they to be tempted to think that the first period of their careers shows that the Soviet security model worked, the second should warn them that it could function only in the Soviet Union. They may want to recreate the KGB structures and use some of its working methods in accordance with old internal regulations still in force. The President's decision to saddle the MVD with the responsibility for coordinating the security campaign in the Caucasus suggests clearly that it is not his intention and that, for the time being at least, the KGB's successor, the FSB, will concentrate mainly on collection and analysis of information. Had he intended to create a Stalinist style security monster, he would quietly have merged directorates and department from several power structures and called it a commission or a service – Boris Yel'tsin's attempt to build a similar monster in the early 1990s failed on a legal technicality, because he decided to call it a ministry.

Industries producing materials and equipment which could be used by terrorists should come under particularly close surveillance. In an operation requiring a high degree of cooperation, the MVD and the FSB will have to introduce new vetting procedures in sensitive enterprises and coordinate their actions with the organisations responsible for the businesses' security. Similar procedures will have to be introduced in the transport companies serving the producers and the users of "delicate" materials. The users will have to look carefully at the security of their

storage systems, the security Achilles heel across Russia. For that purpose, Moscow may be forced to allocate federal funds, distributed and controlled by regional MVD directorates. The civilian explosives producing sector is a good example of the daunting task which continues to face law enforcement and security bodies. In 2003, the police in Russia ran Operation Dynamite Balance, confiscating 8.1 tonnes of explosives. The annual output of 27 enterprises producing explosives for civilian industry is 650 tonnes. These explosives are used by 1,182 mines, oil companies, construction enterprises and others on about 5,000 sites.⁷⁸ The same strict controls should be extended to firearms, oil, fertilisers and dual purpose materials producers.

Vladimir Putin may be forced to rethink his new strategy of combating terrorism if the MVD-coordinated war against terrorism fails. He would then have three options: creating a new security/law enforcement organisation, transferring the security coordination in the North Caucasus to the FSB or, much less likely, to the Army. However, their modus operandi is unlikely to change significantly.

The International Dimension

In the post Beslan reforms, Russia will probably offer two different, radically opposed, policies: one completely intolerant of any criticism of its antiterrorist efforts and of the way it conducts its internal affairs, and the other seeking closer and genuine cooperation with any country or coalition willing to combat the international terrorism worrying Moscow. The most aggressive element of Russia's foreign policy may mean targeting terrorist suspects abroad for physical elimination or intimidation, and more and better organised legal pursuit of people wanted in Russia. This could mean profound changes in some sections of Russian embassies and outposts abroad, as well as a dynamic development of human intelligence. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has declared that terrorism is the fascism of the 21st century. Vladimir Putin has made it clear that terrorists should not feel safe in their own lair, and that Russia will get them, even from abroad.⁷⁹

Russia will invest more money, effort and manpower in cooperation against terrorism with its CIS partners. That policy will be welcomed by many of them, as their alternative partners, the legal systems of liberal democracies, sometimes offer more problems than solutions. The nomination of General Anatoliy Safonov, a former first deputy head of the FSB, Deputy Foreign Minister and an ambassador with special responsibilities, as the presidential representative for international cooperation in combating terrorism⁸⁰ suggests that foreign governments may be well advised to match this highly experienced official at the senior policy level. However, when conducting its battles against international terrorism Russia might encounter problems with some liberal democracies. Russia's open admiration of the law enforcement bodies and the special forces of some of these countries is mixed with complete incomprehension of their legal systems. Moscow will also be much more aggressive when answering criticism voiced by foreign officials and organisations.⁸¹ Angry rhetoric from Moscow should not, however, be interpreted as a rejection of cooperation.⁸²

Moscow will cooperate with international organisations only if it is strictly necessary for operational reasons, but it will seek to improve bilateral ties with individual members of NATO, EU and other international organisations. Mikhail Fradkov, Russian Prime Minister and former envoy to the EU, has already tried to patch up relations with Brussels. Speaking to 25 ambassadors of the EU member states and the head of the EU mission to the Russian Federation, he called for strengthening cooperation in combating terror.⁸³ However, some new members, dominated in the

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past by Moscow, may prove unenthusiastic about an undertaking which they see as strengthening its position regionally and therefore threatening their own interests.

The latest wave of terrorism in Russia has brought it closer to Israel. On 6 September 2004, during a visit to Israel, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov called for better cooperation by the special services of the antiterrorist coalition.⁸⁴ Closer anti-terrorist cooperation between the two countries had already been agreed before the Beslan tragedy. In mid September, the usually well informed daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported that several days after the attack on Beslan a group of Israeli intelligence officers had visited Russia.⁸⁵ The Israeli no-holds-barred methods of combating terrorism is very appealing to Russia. But cooperation between the two countries would have to be discreet, because Moscow needs to maintain its good contacts with the Arab countries and does not want to be seen in the Muslim world as a partner of Israel.

Conclusion

Leading the antiterrorist campaign, the Russian president will have problems controlling regional security hot-heads, grey-haired avengers from the past and law enforcement "shock workers" short-circuiting legal procedures. They may push Russia in a direction neither the majority of Russians or Vladimir Putin want it to go.

He will encourage public debate without allowing anyone to control or influence the antiterrorist campaign unless he says so – such a debate will be dominated by hard liners and extreme hardliners with a small group of liberal democrats generating their ideas and criticisms mainly for export, which will then be amplified by the Western media.

President Putin will have enormous difficulties balancing new security requirements with the democratic freedoms enshrined in the Russian Constitution. He is still very popular and there is no politician in Russia able to challenge him at the ballot box. His next four years in the Kremlin are practically assured and then, in accordance with the present constitution, he will have to retire. If he successfully imposes new stricter laws, and makes the power structures bigger; and if they tackle terrorism, corruption and inefficiency successfully, the Russian voters will forgive him, even if some of their human rights are infringed. If he fails, and the constitution remains unchanged, they will vote for a real hardliner in four years, irrespective of whom Putin chooses to support. He can expect to receive support from the Duma when it comes to budgetary allocation for security projects and organisations. If not, he can dissolve it, reminding the public that it refused to break its holiday during the Beslan tragedy.

Elected bodies and elected individuals have failed recently as managers, supervisors and coordinators of the local security structures. As the security agenda will remain the most important issue in Russia, it is not surprising, therefore, that the Russian president will rely less on elected officials and more on appointed security managers and other professionals. This will not lose him many supporters at home, but it has shown signs of complicating his relationship with Western leaders who, always mindful of the criticism in their own media, have been treating Russia like a potential liberal democracy temporarily hijacked by its president.

Russia's absolute priority is to combat terrorism and it is going to do it its own way without worrying whether the world likes it or not. Other politicians may have to choose between the needs of international security and the political discomfort brought about by Putin-bashing Western media. Countries which decide not to collaborate with Russia in combating international terrorism will save themselves many legal and image problems but will lose a powerful ally. Those countries which decide to work closely with Moscow will have to be prepared for a bumpy ride, and a very measured approach to the legal and operational differences which they are bound to have with their Russian partners.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Izvestia*, 9 September 2004.

² *Vremya Novostey*, 2 September 2004. This tragic figure may look relatively less dramatic if it is remembered that, according to the official statistics of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, between January and September 2004 there were 23,737 murders and attempted murders in Russia; www.mvdinform.ru. Russia's annual murder rate has exceeded 20,000 for the last several years and on one or two occasions in the 1990s doubled it.

³ *Spetsnaz Rossii*, No 9, 2004, p4.

⁴ *Izvestia*, 6 September 2004; president.kremlin.ru, 8 September 2004. It became known later that among the hostages there were two police officers. One, Maj Fatima Dudiyeva, was unarmed. Assisted by hostages she succeeded in changing her uniform for civilian clothes. She survived the siege slightly wounded. The other policeman was armed. He was killed, after shooting one of the attackers. *Spetsnaz Rossii*, No 9, 2004.

⁵ *Strana.ru*, 4 September 2004; *Gazeta.ru*, 18 October 2004.

⁶ *ITAR-TASS*, 2 September 2004.

⁷ *Kommersant*, 6 September 2004, p2.

⁸ *ORT*, 3 and 4 September 2004.

⁹ *ITAR-TASS*, 1 September 2004.

¹⁰ Khuchbarov was put on the wanted list for killing a man in 1998. He then joined a Chechen training camp. After operating in two Chechen groups he joined Shamil Basayev. The federal forces link him with the attack on the FSB Directorate in Ingushetia on 15 September 2003 and hold him responsible for training female suicide bombers. Shamil Basayev referred to him as Colonel Orstkhoyev. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, SNG, 10 September 2004; *Kavkaz-Tsentr*, 17 September 2004, BBC Monitoring Service (MS).

¹¹ *Izvestia*, 9 September 2004; *RTR Russia TV*, 8 September 2004, BBC MS; *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 11 September 2004.

¹² Duma Deputy Dimitri Rogozin, *Ekho Moskvyy*, 5 September 2004; BBC MS. Rogozin was present in the operational HQ in Beslan throughout the siege.

¹³ *RTR*, 6 September 2004; BBC MS.

¹⁴ Doctor Roshal briefly conducted telephone negotiations with the hostage takers.

¹⁵ *Kavkaz-Tsentr*, 17 September 2004, BBC MS.

¹⁶ Interview with North Osetian president Dzasokhov, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 21 September 2004; *ITAR-TASS*, 1 September 2004; *Ekho Moskvyy*, 5 September 2004, BBC MS; *Strana.ru*, 3 September 2004.

¹⁷ Dimitri Rogozin, *Ekho Moskvyy*, 5 September 2004, BBC MS.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Kavkaz-Tsentr*, 17 September 2004, BBC MS.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *RTR*, 6 September 2004; BBC MS. According to unconfirmed reports there were two HQs, one responsible for the negotiations and the other in which the antiterrorist teams Alfa and Vypel trained for the worst case scenario. Technical School Nr 8 was probably the negotiating, information gathering centre and the relay point with Moscow.

²² *ITAR-TASS*, 1 September 2004.

²³ Dimitri Rogozin, *Ekho Moskvyy*, 5 September 2004, BBC MS.

²⁴ *Ekho Moskvyy*, 8 September 2004, BBC MS.

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25 ITAR-TASS, 1 September 2004. The statement was probably made the day before, when Putin was interviewed by the Turkish press.

26 ORT, 1, 2 September 2004.

27 ITAR-TASS, 2 September 2004.

28 *Ekho Moskvyy*, 4 September 2004, BBC MS.

29 *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 11 September 2004.

30 *Spetsnaz Rossii*, No 9, 2004, p4.

31 Dni.ru, 6 September 2004.

32 Strana.Ru, 3 and 4 September 2004; president.kremlin.ru, 8 September 2004.

33 *Novaya Gazeta*, 9 September 2004, quoting an eyewitness; Dni.ru, 6 September 2004.

34 *Novaya Gazeta*, 6-9 September 2004, p4. It looks like there were two groups of volunteers. One was part of the local officially recognised formation – they were allowed within the large and porous perimeter and the other group of armed volunteers was kept outside.

35 *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 11 September 2004.

36 *Novaya Gazeta*, 9 September 2004.

37 President Aleksandr Dzasokhov, *Ekho Moskvyy*, 5 September 2004, BBC MS.

38 RTR, 6 September 2004, BBC MS.

39 *Kommersant*, 15 September 2004.

40 ORT, 5 September 2004.

41 ORT, 4 September 2004; *Ekho Moskvyy*, 5 September 2004, BBC MS; Interfax, 5 September 2004; RIA and Interfax 4 September 2004. All figures do not include members of the law enforcement organs killed. On 11 September, Deputy Prosecutor General Vladimir Kolesnikov said at a press conference in Vladivakaz that bodies of 53 children were yet to be identified (22 boys and 31 girls) as well as 37 adults (37 women and 3 men). There were also 70-80 body parts belonging to “three or four” individuals. RIA Novosti, 11 September 2004.

42 *Le Monde*, 6 September 2004. The figure may have included local volunteers whose deaths were not reported.

43 Lenta.Ru, 6 September 2004.

44 Ibid; Strana.Ru, 13 September 2004; *Spetsnaz Rossii*, No 9, 2004. Some reports spoke about 11 members of the Special Purpose Centre killed. The eleventh officer could have been one of the FSB officers but not a member of the assault team.

45 *Gazeta*, 6 September 2004, p1; *Kommersant*, 6 September 2004, p2.

46 *Izvestia*, 7 September 2004.

47 RIA, 6 September 2004, BBC MS; Utro.ru, 6 September 2004.

48 *Kommersant*, 15 September 2004.

49 ITAR-TASS, 4 September 2004.

50 Kavkaz-Tsentr, 17 September 2004, BBC MS.

51 NTV, 12 September 2004, BBC MS.

52 ITAR-TASS, 4 September 2004.

53 polit.ru, 10 September 2004; *Kommersant*, 15 September 2004, writes that the number of assault rifles found was 31.

54 *Novaya Gazeta*, 9 September 2004.

55 *Ekho Moskvyy*, 5 September 2004, BBC MS.

56 NTV, Moscow, 3 September 2004.

57 ORT, 4 September 2004.

58 Interfax, 3 September 2004.

59 Kavkaz-Tsentr, 17 September 2004, BBC MS.

60 *Ekho Moskvyy*, 18 September 2004, BBC MS.

61 *Ekho Moskvyy*, 17 September 2004, BBC MS; ITAR-TASS, 16 September 2004.

62 NTV Mir, 4 September 2004, BBC MS. Minister of Health and Social Reforms Mikahil Zurabov said that more than 1,200 people were injured in Beslan and 1,015 sought medical assistance. ITAR-TASS, 9 September 2004.

63 Dimitri Rogozin speaking to *Ekho Moskvyy*, 5 September 2004, BBC MS.

64 Raf Shakirov resigned as a chief editor on 6 September. ITAR-TASS, 13 October 2004.

⁶⁵ A statement signed by a group of Russian human rights activists led by Yelena Bonner, the widow of Academician Sakharov, called for holding talks with terrorists on “principled terms” and fair trial if they surrendered. *Ekho Moskvy*, 3 September 2004, BBC MS. Anna Politkovskaya, a maverick liberal journalist, supporting the Chechens, but not the gunmen, suggested that Aslan Maskhadov should have abandoned his hideaway and persuade the hijackers to release all children.

http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/hi/russian/russia/newsid_3646000/3646384.stm.

⁶⁶ The criticism of the Russian authorities in the Nord-Ost operation in October 2002 is based on the fact that 129 people died. It is rarely mentioned that 912 hostages were saved and 41 terrorists killed. The first, purely antiterrorist part, which aimed at the physical elimination of the hostage takers was executed very professionally. The second stage, during which the authorities were expected to provide an instant antidote for the incapacitating gas used by the anti-terrorist teams, was an abysmal failure for which the assault team was not, and should not have been responsible. The reaction of the Russian authorities to the Chechen terrorists’ take-over of a hospital in Budennovsk in 1995, which claimed 166 lives, should not be compared with the events in Beslan, for political and operational reasons. If Yel'tsin’s power structures had been better organised Nord-Ost, Beslan and several other terrorist attacks might not have happened.

⁶⁷ <http://president.kremlin.ru>, 4 September 2004.

⁶⁸ Kavkaz-Tzentr 17 September 2004, BBC MS.

⁶⁹ “Slabykh byut” can also be translated as “the weak are trampled upon” but the Russian President’s past promises that terrorists would be soaked/killed even in toilets and his public offer to circumcise a foreign journalist, may suggest that he meant hitting.

⁷⁰ ORT1, 4 September 2004. Putin assured viewers that the reforms will be introduced in accordance with the constitution.

⁷¹ *Vedomosti*, 19 October 2004; *Novyye Izvestia*, 13 October 2004.

⁷² NTV, 12 September 2004, BBC MS. Other sources suggest that salaries of contract soldiers serving in the region will increase from about 15,000 to 22-23,000 roubles. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 15 September 2004.

⁷³ His previous position was that of the chief of the government apparatus. Strana.Ru, 13 September 2004. For political changes in Russia after Beslan, see: Dr Mark Smith, “Beslan – The Political Fallout”, CSRC, Russian Series, 04/28, September 2004, <http://www.da.mod.uk/csarc>.

⁷⁴ *Novaya Gazeta*, 13 September 2004; *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 10 September 2004.

⁷⁵ Viktor Baranets, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 10 September 2004.

⁷⁶ ORT, 5 September 2004.

⁷⁷ ORT, 20 September 2004.

⁷⁸ *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 24 September 2004.

⁷⁹ Strana.Ru, 13 September 2004; top.ru.rbc.ru.

⁸⁰ ORT, 12 October 2004.

⁸¹ The best example of such a reaction is the Russian response to the Dutch Foreign Minister Bernard Bot’s statement on the evening of 3 September, on behalf of EU foreign ministers, that the EU would like to know from the Russian authorities how the tragedy could have happened. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the query as “insolent, odious and deeply offensive”. Andreas Gross, the Council of Europe rapporteur on Chechnya, defended the Dutch minister’s statement: <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk>, 6 September 2004. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov described the statement as sacrilegious. Interfax, 4 September 2004.

⁸² Sergey Ivanov, Russia’s defence minister, stated on 9 September 2004 that the terrorist will be a target of preventive strikes in any part of the world. The same day, the Russian Foreign Minister advised Western countries not to meddle in Russia’s internal affairs. *Ria-Novosti*, 9 September 2004. Chief of the General Staff Yuriy Baluyevskiy’s warning on 10 September that the Russian armed forces will operate against terrorist bases abroad was misinterpreted (*Izvestia*, 10 September 2004). ITAR-TASS also reported Gen Baluyevskiy’s statement. It included an important section, missing in other reports, that such an operation would be conducted “with other countries”. The only country which was entitled to feel uncomfortable was Georgia, accused by Moscow of tolerating on its soil a number of active Chechen terrorists.

⁸³ ITAR-TASS, 10 September 2004.

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- ⁸⁴ Strana.ru, 6 September 2004; RIA, 6 September 2004.
⁸⁵ *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 September 2004.

Want to Know More ...?

See: C W Blandy, *Chechnya After Beslan*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Caucasus Series, 04/27, September 2004,
<http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

Dr Mark A Smith, *Beslan – The Political Fallout*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Russian Series, 04/28, September 2004,
<http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

Gordon Bennett, *The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, C106, October 2000

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