

Destabilisation of Kabardino-Balkaria: terrorists ever closer to Sochi

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On 18-20 February a series of attacks took place in Kabardino-Balkaria in the Russian North Caucasus, in which tourists from Moscow were among those killed; a funicular on Mount Elbrus was also damaged. These attacks have demonstrated that the republic is currently threatened by terrorism to no less a degree than Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia. The increasing activity of armed underground insurgents and the widening 'zone of Caucasus instability' which it covers is moving ever closer to Sochi, where the Winter Olympic Games are to take place in 2014. The recent attacks took place during a visit to the Olympic facilities by Russia's President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin; this act strikes directly at the prestige of the state, and may indicate that the terrorists' intention is to disrupt the preparations for the games.

The weekend's tragic events

On 18 February, members of the armed underground murdered four tourists from Moscow. On the night of 19 February, the funicular on Mount Elbrus was blown up (there were no casualties, but repairs may take up to six months). On the night of 20 February, military engineers defused an explosive device, equal to 70 kilograms of TNT, which had been placed in a car parked in front of a hotel in the resort town of Terskol. During the same weekend a village headman was murdered, and in the republic's capital Nalchik, a policeman was killed during shooting.

The attacks have been claimed by the so-called 'Vilayat (province) of Kabardia, Balkaria and Karachai', part of the Emirate of the Northern Caucasus, a virtual Islamic 'state' led by Dokku Umarov, which covers the whole region and has been fighting for its *de facto* separation from Russia. It appears that the terrorism in the Republic is indeed the work of guerrillas associated with the Emirate. Although the local institutions of force have stated that the murder of the tourists was the work of the 'Baksan Jamaat' and its leader, Kazbek Tashuyev, most experts doubt whether any such structure exists at all.

Tensions rising in the republic

The latest attacks are part of a process of the gradual destabilisation of Kabardino-Balkaria, which has been apparent for over a year (in 2005 the guerrillas attacked Nalchik in large

numbers, but later the activity of these armed groups decreased). According to the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation, 97 persons, including 42 officers of the institutions of force and 24 guerrillas, were killed in the republic last year. In terms of the number of attacks, Kabardino-Balkaria is second after Dagestan in the Russian Federation (the most notorious actions include the blowing up of the Baksan power plant and the murder of the republic's mufti Anas Pshykhachev). The degree to which the republic has been infiltrated by armed Islamist groups should be considered as very high. It cannot be ruled out that the militants also have sympathisers among the representatives of the local authorities.

The republic's instability is even more of a threat as Kabardino-Balkaria is a popular place for recreation, especially in the winter. There are a number of resorts, ski and sports centres. Further aggravation of the situation will be a halt to tourist traffic, which apart from the measurable material losses, will mean the increasing isolation of the republic and its growing 'alienation' from the cultural and social sphere of Russia (as has happened, for example, with Dagestan and Chechnya).

The Olympic context and the authorities' response

The recent attacks coincided with a visit to the Caucasus by the highest representatives of the Russian government. On 18 February President Dmitri Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and several members of the government visited Krasnaya Polana near Sochi. At the time alpine skiing races (part of the European Cup competition) were taking place there, as the first international test of the future Olympic pistes. The politicians were accompanied by a representative of the International Olympic Committee, Jean-Claude Killy, who spoke positively about Russia's preparations for the Olympics.

On 18 February, just before the attack on the Russian tourists, President Medvedev said at a meeting of the Russian Security Council that the highest priority is to prevent "various types of provocation" aimed at hurting the Olympic Games. He suggested that Georgia may also be behind such provocations, and he stressed that January 2012 will see the start of activities by a new military staff responsible for security at the Olympics. In response to the attacks of 22 February, Medvedev held a meeting with the members of the National Counter-Terrorist Committee in Vladikavkaz. Aleksandr Khloponin, the president's representative in the North Caucasus Federal District, placed part of the responsibility for the rise in tension on the local authorities at different levels, who in his opinion had not responded appropriately to the existing threats. The government has decided to declare a counter-terrorist operation regime in two districts of Kabardino-Balkaria, which means increasing the powers of the institutions of force, and closer monitoring of the population. On 22 and 23 February, there were several exchanges of fire in the area between *spetsnaz* soldiers and militants. All hiking and skiing routes in the surroundings of Mount Elbrus have been closed.

Conclusions and forecasts

By attacking targets which are quite close to the sites of the Olympic Games – the distance from the surroundings of Elbrus to Krasnaya Polana, where most of the races will take place, is just over 200 km as the crow flies – the terrorists have struck directly at the prestige of the state. For several years Russian leaders have actively and personally promoted not just the Games themselves, but also tourism in the Caucasus, and they have been encouraging domestic and foreign businessmen to invest in the region. The Caucasian armed underground has shown that it poses a real threat to the Olympics in Sochi and the preparations for them. Their attacks are coming ever closer to the sites where the Games are to take place. It cannot be ruled out that the terrorists, who have managed to destabilise the situation in Kabardino-Balkaria, will now strengthen their activity in those republics situated to the west of it, namely Karachai-Cherkessia and the Republic of Adygea. Sabotaging the preparations for the Olympic Games may become the main objective of the armed underground in the western part of the North Caucasus. It should be assumed that it is just a matter of time before attempts to strike in Sochi itself are made.

It seems that Moscow currently has no idea how to combat the Caucasian insurgency. The use of force has proved expensive and not very efficient, and attempts to start development projects over the last year have not brought any results, as most of the funds sent to the Caucasus have been appropriated by clans linked to the various republics' governments.

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