

Volgograd: terrorist attacks in the pre-Olympic period

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Two terrorist attacks in the southern Russian town of Volgograd on 29 and 30 December resulted in the deaths of 36 people and injuries to over a hundred. Although no-one has admitted carrying out the attacks, it seems most likely that underground forces acting under the banner of the Emirate of the Caucasus are behind them. The bombers' main aim was probably to call the effectiveness of the Russian government's anti-terrorism policy into question before the Olympic Games in Sochi. Internationally, the effect of the attacks was, on the one hand, a discussion in the Western media about the security of the Games, and on the other hand, expressions of solidarity with Russia from Western governments, and proposals from the latter on how to help ensure security before the Olympics. The tragedy in Volgograd is of much greater importance in the domestic context as, unlike before, there has been no clear social consolidation around the authorities' counter-terrorism efforts. The attacks have demonstrated the security services' ineffectiveness in the fight against terrorism, despite their being continuously funded and outfitted with additional powers; and the government's uncoordinated response has revealed the Kremlin's impotence in the face of growing internal problems. The attacks have further demonstrated the growing lack of public confidence in the government, and have highlighted the rise in social problems within Russia (ethnic tensions, radicalisation, and a crisis of values).

Volgograd once again in the terrorists' sights

An explosion took place at the railway station on 29 December, and another in a trolleybus on 30 December. These were the latest in a series of attacks in Volgograd in the past two months (on 21 October a female terrorist detonated a bomb on a bus, killing 8 people). Although there is conflicting information on the subject, it appears most likely that these were suicide bombings organised by armed Islamic radicals, based in Dagestan and operating under the banner of the Emirate of the Caucasus. As early as last July, the Emirate's leader Dokku Umarov had threatened a resumption of terrorist attacks in Russia, and called for the Olympics in Sochi to be disrupted.

Regardless of the intentions of those who organised the attacks, they have raised the issues of the effectiveness of the security measures taken in connection with the preparations for the Olympic Games, as well as Russia's international image. The possibility of a terrorist attack in Sochi cannot be ruled out, but this seems unlikely due to the *de facto* isolation of the city from the outside world, total security control over the movement of traffic, and the assembly of Russian armed forces both around Sochi and within the city itself (population around 50,000).

At the same time, however, it is hard to maintain that the latest round of attacks has seriously damaged Russia's image abroad. Although they have provoked discussion in the Western media about the safety of the Olympics, we should in fact expect the latter to keep quiet as the Olympics approach (as long as there are no subsequent attacks). Among the official reactions, gestures of solidarity with Russia predominated, as well as offers of support in the fight against terrorism, including intelligence sharing (from the US and the UK among others).

The Russian government's impotence and loss of face

The attacks in Volgograd are of much greater importance for the socio-political situation within Russia itself. The very fact that they were carried out has called the thesis of the efficiency of the Russian state security system into question, the more so as during last year, in preparation for the Olympics, the Russian security agencies gave high priority to counter-terrorism. Operational activities in the North Caucasus were stepped up; a number of changes in the legislation were made to heighten the criminal liability of persons involved in terrorist activities; and the preventive powers of the special services were extended, so they can now work without supervision by either the prosecutor's office or the courts. The authorities' failure was compounded by the fact that the recent bombings struck Volgograd, a city which became the subject of a special supervision operation, run by the FSB and the Interior Ministry, after the suicide terrorist attack last October.

The impression of the government's helplessness was intensified by its uncoordinated and inconsistent response to the attacks. President Vladimir Putin only addressed the matter publicly in his New Year's message (in the country's furthest time zone, in the Far East, a version of the speech recorded before the attacks was broadcast, in which no reference to them was made), repeating the phrase used since 1999 that a united and uniform Russia will fight the terrorists until they have been completely annihilated. Representatives of the Russian government (including the institutions of force), and the media in their wake, have proffered contradictory information about the timeline and organisers of the attacks (such as reports of Russian converts to Islam, a Dagestani element, a Saudi element); attempts to manipulate information were also made (such as references to the alleged heroic behaviour of a police officer at the railway station, successful special operations in the North Caucasus, etc.). In their speeches, some Russian politicians and central officials (including General Viktor Kazantsev, the president's first representative in the Southern Federal District) blamed the regional authorities for the situation; they in turn indicated that the terrorists had come to Volgograd from the North Caucasus just before the attacks.

The aftermath of the attacks also saw a wave of criticism of the institutions of force, something unprecedented in Russia. One example of this is the appeals by representatives of the Federation Council and State Duma to establish rules allowing the sacking of the heads of institutions of force responsible for areas where terrorist attacks have occurred, and for imprisonment for civil servants and officers of the security agencies found responsible for "indulging terrorism". Calls from Russian politicians advocating the reintroduction of the death penalty for terrorists should also be seen as a sign of the state's powerlessness.

The authorities have also resorted to measures which are as standard as they are ineffective, and have repeatedly been used in similar situations in the past: a state of emergency was introduced in Volgograd (and rescinded on 4 January), and additional units of police officers, FSB and internal troops were sent there before Putin's visit (on 1 January); they inspected the buildings and people which would be close to the president's route and residence (as a result, about 800 people were detained, mainly on suspicion of administrative offenses).

Panic and anger in society

The authorities' chaotic and indecisive actions exacerbated the panic that prevailed in Volgograd immediately after the attacks. Residents were afraid to use public transport, and some businesses and factories organised special buses for their workers to use. The city cancelled many events associated with the New Year celebrations, and there were reports that shopping malls were closed down. A spontaneous rally of several dozen nationalists took place on 31 December demanding the resignation of the governor of the Volgograd Region, which was dispersed by the police. Other residents also took independent action, as primarily expressed by the bottom-up formation of 'people's' groupings patrolling the city.

Observers have pointed out that there was no such level of panic after the 1999 attacks (these were the prelude to the start of the second Chechen war, which brought President Putin to power). At the same time, the media and social networking sites have witnessed a wave of discontent, in which it is significant that – unlike in 1999 – criticism has been directed not against the terrorists, but against the authorities, including President Putin himself. This seems to show that the government's hopes of basing its continued social legitimacy on relying on the threat of terrorism and the need for a firm hand are running out.

The attacks in Volgograd have also called the social stability of Russia into question, especially in the context of rising nationalist sentiments directed against migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia (specifically, the fear of retaliatory pogroms organised by nationalist groups). The topic of ethnic-Russian converts allegedly being involved in organising the attacks also points to an ideological void and a crisis of values in Russia, as reflected in the growing phenomenon of ethnic Russians converting to Islam.

Forecast

Most crucial for the further development of events will be whether any subsequent attacks take place before the Olympic Games in Sochi (starting on 7 February). The escalation of violence could not only destabilise the internal situation in Russia, but also threaten the calm conduct of the Games themselves. At the same time, simply silencing the terrorist threat will not resolve the socio-political problems discussed above, but only postpone them, thus putting off the rise of internal tensions in Russia.

As regards the possible escalation of anti-terrorist measures in the Caucasus, the authorities have their hands tied because of the Olympics and the upcoming G8 Summit (which will also be held in Sochi in June 2014). In the near future we can only expect an intensification of the measures currently being employed: operations aimed at militant groups, maximum isolation of the Caucasian republics from the rest of the country,

increased check-ups on railways, roads, and so on. In the second half of the year, a decision may be taken to increase the presence of federal troops as well as the scale of the counter-terrorism operations in the Caucasus, especially in Dagestan, where the situation is currently at its tensest.