

Desperate action by fighters in Grozny

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On the night of 3 to 4 December in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, there were heavy clashes between government forces and Chechen militants operating under the banner of the Caucasus Emirate, an Islamic armed organisation which seeks to break away from Russia's North Caucasus and create an Islamic state there. A group of militants penetrated to the centre of Grozny to attack the police station and a police patrol. After an exchange of fire, the mujahideen took refuge in the nearby Press House and a school. The shooting lasted several hours, during which the Chechen law enforcement agencies used heavy weapons; all the fighters (11 people) were killed. Fourteen Chechen officials were also killed, and up to 36 were injured. The victims included at least one civilian. During the fighting the multi-story Press House was set on fire. On the eve of the attack, the militants uploaded a recording on the internet which declared that they were operating on the orders of Aslan Biutukayev, a.k.a Emir Khamzata (the emir of the so-called Vilayet of Chechnya, which forms part of the Caucasus Emirate; the leader of the Emirate is the Dagestani Ali-Askhab Kebekov). According to their statement, the action was an act of revenge by suicide bombers for the persecution of Muslims in Chechnya. On 5 December Kadyrov announced that the fighters' families will be expelled from the republic and their houses demolished.

Commentary

- This action came as a surprise, because in recent months the smashed and decimated militants had not displayed any great activity, and Chechnya had been one of the most stable republics of the Caucasus. The aim of the desperate attack was probably to demonstrate that the armed underground in Chechnya still exists and is able to carry out attacks. By organising the attack, the new emir of Chechnya (Biutukayev assumed the leadership of the Chechen mujahideen in September 2013 after the death of Dokku Umarov, the emir of Chechnya and the Caucasus) probably intended to strengthen his own position within the structures of the Emirate. It cannot be ruled out that another objective was to inhibit the outflow of fighters and volunteers for jihad to Syria and Iraq, a movement which is growing in strength.
- The clashes in the centre of Grozny, as well as the large losses among Chechen officers, have struck at the image of the Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, who has long argued that the militants have been broken up, and are unable to carry out offensive actions. To increase the propaganda effect, the militants probably deliberately organised their attack to coincide with President Vladimir Putin's message to the Federal Assembly.

- We should not expect a serious escalation of hostilities in the North Caucasus, or the Islamic State associated with it. The militants are able to organise one-off armed actions or terrorist attacks, but do not have the capacity or sufficient public support to bring about a general uprising, or organise attacks on a larger scale. The main cause of the resistance still smouldering in the Caucasus republics (the majority of the clashes are currently taking place not in Chechnya, but in neighbouring Dagestan) is the brutal repression by the Russian power structures in the context of counter-terrorism, as well as the attractiveness to some of the local youth of the idea of creating an Islamic state in the Caucasus. As Kadyrov has previously announced, we should expect a further wind-up of mass repression and human rights violations in the country.