

Blaming the victim. Russia's initial reactions to the attack on Israel

Witold Rodkiewicz, Katarzyna Chawryło

By the end of the weekend of 7–8 October only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation has taken an official position on the Hamas terrorist attack on Israeli territory. On 7 October, the ministry's spokeswoman Maria Zakharova declared that Moscow "is gravely concerned over a sharp escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict" and called on the parties to immediately cease fire, to end the violence and, "with the assistance of the international community, begin negotiations to establish peace in the Middle East. She indirectly blamed Israel itself for the escalation, claiming that it is "a direct consequence of the chronic failure to comply with the corresponding resolutions of the UN and its Security Council". She also explicitly blamed the West, accusing it of blocking the work of the Middle East Quartet of international mediators (Russia, the United States, the European Union, the UN).

On 7 October, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov spoke by telephone with his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry. According to a Russian communiqué, the ministers expressed "deep concern over the sharp escalation of the situation" and "called for an immediate ceasefire and the organisation of Palestinian-Israeli talks based on the norms of international law and existing UN and Security Council resolutions". On 9 October, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov suggested that Hamas had used Western weapons previously handed over to Ukraine during its attack on Israel.

The attack on Israel by Hamas militants, which began on 7 October, was the main focus of Russian news and current affairs programmes. Events surrounding Israel were reported on extensively and emotively, pushing the situation on the Ukrainian front to the background. The narrative emphasised Russia's unequivocal refusal to take sides and presented the rationale and losses in a balanced manner. At the same time, it was pointed out that responsibility for the attack lay with the West, which was allegedly providing assistance to Hamas. The narrative regarding Israel was also used to whitewash Russia's actions, pointing out that it had never committed crimes against its neighbours.

Commentary

- Several elements are notable in Moscow's initial official response. First, there was a lack of condemnation of the Hamas attack on Israel, including the murders committed against civilians. Secondly, Russia has de facto attributed blame to the victim of the attack (Israel) by drawing attention to the wider context – Israel's obstruction of the

process of establishing an independent Palestinian state. Thirdly, the Russian position is characterised by an apparent balancing in its treatment of both sides, calling for a ceasefire when hostilities were still taking place on Israeli territory. Finally, Moscow is attempting to use the conflict to induce the West to undertake joint diplomatic action with Russia (the 'Quartet of international mediators'). The West would thus be led to believe that Russia is an 'indispensable partner' in the process of settling the Middle East conflict. This would create a situation in which Moscow could try to make its cooperation in resolving or mitigating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict conditional on the discontinuation or limitation of Western military aid to Ukraine.

- Russian calls for de-escalation and the cessation of hostilities should be regarded as disingenuous and can be dismissed as pure facelifting. Open warfare between Israel and Hamas-ruled Gaza has numerous benefits for Moscow. Firstly, the Hamas onslaught creates an additional problem for Washington, diverting resources (financial aid, equipment supplies, political engagement) away from Ukraine. Secondly, it makes it easier for Russia to scupper Western attempts to influence Arab states to take a more sympathetic stance towards Ukraine in the Moscow-Kyiv conflict and consequently to reduce economic and political cooperation with Russia. Unequivocal US support for Israel has the effect of strengthening the Kremlin's position in the Arab states and the Muslim world as a whole. Thirdly, in a situation of increasing threat, Israel will be even less inclined than previously to abandon its current de facto neutral stance towards the Russian-Ukrainian war. Furthermore, Moscow may be counting on a growing interest in Jerusalem to end the war in Europe, even on Russian terms. Indeed, Israel's aim would be to gain Russia's political support, while simultaneously bringing about a termination of the Russian-Ukrainian war since it is drawing Washington's attention and resources away from helping Israel. Finally, it makes the process of normalising relations between Jerusalem and the Arab states (especially Saudi Arabia) very difficult, if not impossible. All this means that Moscow has a vested interest in the prolongation of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation and even in it widening into a regional war between Israel and Arab radicals backed by Iran.
- For Russian propaganda, the opportunity to redirect the domestic audience's attention to a topic other than the war in Ukraine is undoubtedly an advantage, as Russian society is weary of the war and disillusioned by the lack of success on the frontline. The blame given to the West for the Hamas attack and the consensus among experts that the conflict will spread to the entire Middle East are designed to put pressure on the West and force an accelerated end to the war in Ukraine on Russian terms.