

Increasing radicalisation: terrorist attacks in Dagestan

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On 23 June, a series of coordinated terrorist attacks took place in Dagestan, a republic in Russia's North Caucasus region. The terrorists set fire to a church and a synagogue in Derbent, targeted a church and a traffic police post in the Republic's capital, Makhachkala, and fired on a police vehicle in the village of Sergokala, the hometown of all identified perpetrators. The latest death toll stands at 21 (including 16 officers, one of them being the head of police in the town of Dagestanskiye Ogn), with 46 injured. Five gunmen were killed during the counter-terrorism operation. The investigation into the attacks will be conducted by the central authorities of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation.

Commentary

- The attack was likely motivated by Islamic extremism. Supporting factors include the timing of the attacks (the Orthodox Pentecost), the choice of targets (one of the victims was an Orthodox priest), the perpetrators' identities – two sons and a relative of the head of the Sergokalinsky region, who was a member of United Russia and a deputy to the regional parliament, were reportedly identified among the killed gunmen; the official was detained, dismissed from his position, and expelled from the party; he allegedly confirmed the fundamentalist views of his relatives during the interrogation – and recent events in Dagestan. Last October, this republic was the scene of anti-Semitic riots (see '[Anti-Israeli riots in the North Caucasus](#)'), and in April this year, militants planning terrorist attacks were detained. Reportedly, they were also involved in plotting the March attack in Krasnogorsk near Moscow (see '[Islamists and the 'Ukrainian trace'. The Moscow concert hall terrorist attack](#)'), for which Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K) claimed responsibility. According to the Dagestani police, five cells of terrorist organisations were liquidated in 2023, with 17 people detained and three killed during the operations.
- The attacks in Dagestan, a republic with a complex ethnic and clan structure and a minority ethnic-Russian population, fit into the broader picture of the North Caucasus situation. Over the past few months, acts of terrorism and clashes with security forces have been seen in Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia. In June, prisoners declaring themselves Islamic State fighters staged a riot in a pre-trial detention centre in Rostov-on-Don and took hostages. Increasing Islamist radicalisation in the North Caucasus and the intensified activity of terrorist cells in Russia can be attributed to regional dynamics, such as generational changes, religious identity taking prevalence over national identity and conflicts between Sufism, linked to the official clergy and the government, and Salafism, which is an 'underground' current increasingly popular among younger generations (see '[Russia's 'Middle East': the escalation of religious conflicts in the](#)

Northern Caucasus'), as well as international influences like the intensification of ISIS-K's activities. The Dagestan attackers reportedly attended a Salafi mosque (Salafis are a respected group in the Republic and operate in Dagestan's public space much more openly than, for example, in Chechnya, where they may face persecution), and one of them allegedly lived in Turkey, where he could have been recruited. The Russian invasion of Ukraine might have contributed to their radicalisation, given the fact that illegal weapons have become more easily accessible, and the focus and resources of the law enforcement agencies have been diverted to Ukraine. Consequently, more terrorist acts could occur in the region and beyond in the near future.

- Both the scale and coordination of the attacks in Dagestan suggest that the perpetrators had links with international Islamist terrorist organisations, like Vilayat Kavkaz, the North Caucasus cell of Islamic State established in 2015, which has absorbed some of the assets of the dismantled Caucasus Emirate. Media channels associated with ISIS-K have praised the attack. In turn, the Russian government may attempt to use the situation for political and propaganda purposes and indirectly place the blame on Western and Ukrainian intelligence agencies, as seen following the Krasnogorsk attack. Governor Sergey Melikov ambiguously referenced the war in Ukraine when discussing the attacks, while Dagestan State Duma Deputy Abdulkhakim Gadzhiev directly blamed Ukrainian and NATO secret services, a statement which was criticised by Senator Dmitry Rogozin. Similarly, Leonid Slutsky, leader of the populist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, echoed these accusations.