

“Extremists and Bandits” How Russia Views the War against Terrorism

PONARS Policy Memo No. 246

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April 2002

When President Vladimir Putin picked up the phone to express his sympathy to President George W. Bush in the aftermath of September 11, and then followed-up by providing concrete assistance to the campaign in Afghanistan and quickly acquiescing to U.S. plans to establish bases in Central Asia, Washington policymakers and analysts reasonably concluded Putin had made a strategic, even historic, choice to align Russia’s foreign policy with that of the U.S.

From the beginning of his presidency in January 2000, Putin pushed the idea of a concerted campaign against terrorism with U.S. and European leaders. He was one of the first to raise the alarm about terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, and to warn of linkages between these camps, well-financed terrorist networks, and Islamic militant groups operating in Europe and Eurasia. Russia also actively supported the Northern Alliance in its struggle with the Taliban in Afghanistan. In December 2000, Moscow joined Washington in supporting United Nations sanctions against the Taliban, and later appealed for additional sanctions against Pakistan for aiding the Taliban. After the attacks on the United States, Putin even went so far as to suggest he had been expecting a massive terrorist strike—it had only been a matter of time. The events of September 11 were a shock, but not a surprise. Putin’s support for Bush was, therefore, entirely consistent with his efforts to draw world attention to the terrorist threat.

The terrorist attacks also occurred at a juncture when Putin was actively seeking to change and improve Russia’s relationship with the United States. After a rocky start with the Bush administration—marked by spy scandals and a dispute over U.S. intentions to build a missile defense shield and withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty—Putin had worked hard to build a personal affinity with Bush, remove the sense of confrontation, underscore that the Cold War was finally over, and find some mechanism for transcending differences. After September 11, the war against terrorism seemed to be that mechanism. Russia and the United States had finally made common cause.

Common cause, however, assumes both parties have a shared view of the problem and the potential range of solutions. Unfortunately, Putin does not view terrorism in the same way as Bush. The terrorist threat to Russia is not equivalent to the threat to the United States, and Russia’s responses to terrorism have been quite different from the United States’.

Like the United States, Russia no longer sees its primary threats as emanating from states, but from an array of transnational actors. Yet, when one moves beyond Al Qaeda and the Taliban, the United States and Russia no longer share the same vision. In fact, Putin’s and the

Russian public's view of the terrorist threat remains largely unchanged since September 11. It is narrow and specific to Russia, not to the United States.

The Threat Within

In examining and parsing Russian discussions of terrorism, the threat quickly becomes muddled with concerns about “extremism” (mostly religious but sometimes political), “banditry” and criminality (frequently used in conjunction with the Chechens), general social disorder, and the rupture of national unity. Putin, for example, often refers to “the struggle against terror and extremism” rather than the war against terrorism. Russians do not see the state as under attack from the outside, but from the inside, as a result of its military, political, and economic weakness. Unlike the United States, terrorism is not so much targeting Russia as Russia is unintentionally spawning it. State failure, not success, is the root of Russia's terrorist threat.

In the 1990s, political instability and increasing poverty and inequality in Russia and Eurasia provided a fertile ground for the germination of radical groups and the infiltration of foreign Islamic networks. The revival of Islam after the collapse of the USSR attracted funding for new mosques, religious schools, and cultural programs from the Middle East and Asia. Violent secessionist conflicts in the South Caucasus, civil war in Tajikistan, and two wars in Chechnya invited similar funding—but for weapons and military training. They also brought in religious fighters from other wars. As the casualties in conflicts, and economic, political, and social problems mounted, disaffected Muslim groups in Eurasia became increasingly radicalized.

In 2002, Putin and Russian policymakers see religious conflict as one of the greatest threats to the state. This is not a conflict between confessions, but within one religion—Islam—which is an officially recognized “Russian” religion. Russia's estimated 20 million Muslims (a much-disputed figure) have centuries-old roots, although the 1990s religious revival also produced recent converts. Russian leaders depict this conflict as a struggle between traditional communities and well-organized and well-financed foreign Islamic networks that have exploited Russia's weakness to infiltrate its Muslim communities and promote “alien” and politically radical forms of Islam.

In the 1990s, these alien, political forms of Islam were collectively and loosely termed “Wahhabi,” in reference to an austere, reformist branch of Islam that emerged in Saudi Arabia in the 1700s. Russian leaders rarely referred to specific Islamic or terrorist networks, but after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 1996, they complained that Afghan-trained militants and mercenaries from the Balkans and the Middle East had entered Chechnya. The actual numbers and provenance of these fighters among the forces in Chechnya remained uncertain, but usually centered around the figure of Jordanian-born “Khattab,” who joined the Chechens in 1995 during the first war with Moscow. Russian officials described Khattab and his close associate, Chechen field commander Shamil Basayev, as having “tens,” sometimes “hundreds,” of “Arab” and other foreign nationals at their command. Some Chechen fighters were also described as having been trained in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and other Muslim countries, and the foreign-trained and -financed forces were on occasion referred to as “Afghans” (although not in reference to their ethnicity), adding further confusion.

Since September 11, fighters in Chechnya have been explicitly linked to Al Qaeda. The Russian and U.S. press frequently described Al Qaeda forces captured and killed in Afghanistan as a mixture of Arabs, Pakistanis, and Chechens, even though no one has officially or

unofficially confirmed the presence of Chechens in Afghanistan. Recent press coverage also indicates that none of the reported Russian citizens among the Al Qaeda prisoners confined by the United States in the Guantanamo Bay facility are in fact ethnic Chechens. In February–March 2002, Al Qaeda forces were also reported to have fled Afghanistan to seek refuge among the Chechen population in Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge, again without explicit information on the numbers of fighters involved or their ethnic origin.

In many respects, the Wahhabi and Al Qaeda-Chechen linkages are a red herring. The real concern in Moscow is not the activities of a handful of terrorists, but the radicalization of Russia’s Muslim communities by foreign influences. Russia is especially worried about areas where Muslims are compactly settled: in the North Caucasus (including Chechnya and Dagestan) and the Volga region (including Tatarstan). Moscow believes politicized religious identity could produce demands for separate Islamic statelets—just as earlier political demands from ethnic groups led to secessionist movements—and will lead to more violent conflicts. Indeed, in the spring of 1999, Moscow engaged in a military standoff with “Wahhabi” villages in Dagestan that had amassed weapons and demanded political and economic concessions. In August 1999, forces led by Shamil Basayev invaded Dagestan to support the “Wahhabis,” providing the pretext for a new war between Moscow and Chechnya.

Dealing with the Threat

Although the Russian government has demanded that Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov repudiate terrorism and sever ties with Basayev and Khattab, and has actively supported U.S. efforts to eradicate Al Qaeda’s network in Afghanistan, it has not claimed that terrorists are operating elsewhere in Russia; nor has it launched further military campaigns. Instead, Moscow’s policy is now focused on providing financial, material, and political support to traditional Muslim groups and on marginalizing and forcing out foreign groups. Like the United States, the Russian government is trying to cut off the external financial sources for Islamic networks operating in Russia, but it is also promoting and sponsoring official Muslim movements, mosques, and religious schools, and courting and coopting domestic Muslim leaders. Putin has been increasingly careful to underscore that the Russian government is waging the war in Chechnya against foreign-sponsored terrorists not law-abiding Russian Muslims. In June 2000, the government installed Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov, the former Mufti of Chechnya and a vocal opponent of “Wahhabism,” as Moscow’s administrator of Chechnya. In March 2001, Iranian president Mohammad Khatami (an important Islamic ally for Russia) was encouraged to visit a new Islamic University in Tatarstan’s capital, Kazan. And, in December 2001, a new minister for minority and religious affairs was appointed to coordinate the government’s efforts.

This is how Russia sees and is dealing with its terrorist threat. Russians expect more attacks like September 11, not something different. Acts of terror and politically and commercially motivated assassinations were a fact of life in Russia in the 1990s. The bombing of apartment buildings in Moscow and Volgograd in 1999 (which were linked to the Chechens, but whose perpetrators have not been identified) brought political violence to a new level. Public vigilance increased, but the government has not noticeably reinforced homeland security since then. Security is still lax at airports—even woefully so for international flights to the United States—and in public buildings, although some have attempted to install new screening devices in government institutions. An increased police presence on city streets is not evident. Despite the

threshold of terror crossed on September 11, Chechen attempts to plant a “dirty bomb” in Moscow in the first war (using radioactive material from a hospital), mishaps with anthrax, and international concerns about the safety of Russia’s military arsenals, Russians do not perceive an increased risk that weapons of mass destruction will be used in an attack against them. In short, U.S. fears about the next round of terror do not resonate with the Russian public.

The Threat Ahead

In fact, Putin finds himself in something of a quandary. As the months have passed since September 11, Russian and U.S. purposes have diverged. The campaign in Afghanistan has progressed. The United States has moved on to tackle the tentacles of Al Qaeda in the Philippines, Yemen, and on Russia’s border in Georgia. Washington has designated Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as state sponsors of terrorism. And, now, the United States seems committed to a preemptive strike against Iraq.

Putin prides himself on Russia’s intelligence capabilities. Russian leaders think they know their enemy and it is certainly not in Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. Although Russian intelligence officials concede that U.S. concerns about Saddam Hussein’s acquisition of weapons of mass destruction have merit, they feel the threat can be contained and managed. From Russia’s perspective, Iran is a stabilizing force in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, not a state-sponsor of terrorism. North Korea is an unstable neighbor, but not a military threat. In other word’s, Bush’s axis of evil is not the same as Putin’s.

For Putin, his association with Bush’s war on terrorism has become something unpredictable that could destabilize the entire region to Russia’s south in the Middle East. Russia and the United States have no common cause beyond Afghanistan and tackling Al Qaeda. Although Putin will not risk a rift with Bush, he will certainly seek to disassociate Russia from any U.S. action in Iraq. When he picked up the phone on September 11, Putin knew the limits of Russia’s terrorist threat. Now, he fears not what the terrorists will do next, but where and how the United States will strike in the war against terrorism, and what impact this will have on Russia.

If Russia and the United States continue to cooperate in the war against terrorism, these divergent views will have to be reconciled. A dialogue on terrorism, extremists, and bandits is long overdue.

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