

**“Juicy Morsels”
Putin’s Beslan Address and the Construction of
the New Russian Identity**

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A Freudian Slip?

Russia President Putin’s state of the nation address on September 4, 2004, immediately following the terrorist act in Beslan, was regarded by many as a strategic blueprint. He has made several statements pertaining to the national interest and national strategy:

- He has admitted to the strategic “failure” to respond to the challenges of the global world;
- Much like George W. Bush following 9/11, Putin has qualified the terrorist attack as a “total, cruel, and full-scale war” meant to weaken and divide the country;
- He has called for the “mobilization of the nation”;
- In one of the most intriguing passages, Putin revealed that he believed some countries threatened by Russia’s nuclear deterrent could be supporting the terrorist attacks to try to weaken Russia. In Putin’s words,

We showed weakness, and the weak are trampled upon. Some want to cut off a juicy morsel from us while others are helping them. They are helping because they believe that, as one of the world’s major nuclear powers, Russia is still posing a threat to someone, and therefore this threat must be removed. And terrorism is, of course, only a tool for achieving these goals.

Putin’s message was even more eloquent in what he had omitted. Namely, he failed to mention the war in Chechnya once, preferring instead to lay the blame on the conveniently vague and all-encompassing notion of international terrorism.

At a meeting with Western journalists and scholars on September 6, Putin adopted a more nuanced approach but kept his earlier accusatory tone:

“I did not say Western countries were initiating terrorism, and I did not say it was policy. But we have observed incidents. It is a replay of the Cold War mentality.

There are certain people who want us to be focused on internal problems and they pull strings here so that we don't raise our heads internationally."

That "juicy morsel" from the September 4 address has left Western policy-makers nervous and analysts guessing. Was it one of Putin's "Freudian slips", like the infamous "destroy them in the outhouse" in 1999, or a suggestion to a French reporter "to undergo a circumcision in Russia" in 2003? Or, was it an attempt to conceal his own failure to deliver on the promise to eradicate terrorism (rather than electoral legitimacy, this promise lies at the core of his "contract with the nation"), and to shift the guilt to the new bogeyman of the international terrorism?

The following analysis suggests three levels of interpretation of Putin's words:

- *The discourse level*, analyzing the "deep grammar" of Putin's statement, and the popular discourses to which his address caters (the "anti-Russian conspiracy", the "Great Power" mythology, etc.);
- *The identity level*: the use of war rhetoric to construct a new Russian identity;
- *The policy level*: Putin's address as an instrument of a larger political project, an improbable mix of mobilization and modernization.

Finally, the analysis looks into the foreign policy implications of the post-Beslan agenda.

The Conspiracy Theory

Fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, most Russians still believe that the breakup of the USSR was an elaborate plot by the "external forces" aimed at weakening and dismembering Russia and eventually exploiting its natural riches. Simplistic as it sounds, this concept has gained remarkable traction within Russian society and the elite, especially in the security and foreign policy establishment. In particular, the events of the past five years, from NATO's war in Kosovo to the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to the dual enlargement of NATO and the EU, and the deployment of U.S. forces in Central Asia and of U.S. military advisors in Georgia, have left many Russians wondering about the "geopolitical encirclement" of the country. Added to this are Russia's apprehensions concerning the assertive EU policy in the former Soviet Union (e.g. in Transdniestria, where the EU has virtually blocked Russia's peace plan), and the involvement of the West in the Rose Revolution in Georgia in November 2003, and in the Ukrainian elections in November 2004.

Geopolitical thinking is alive and well in Russia. Indeed, it is the dominant framework in Russian foreign policy thinking, shrouded in the notions of the "geopolitical Heartland" and the "Great Game." According to Konstantin Kosachev, the Head of the Duma Foreign Affairs Committee, "the outside world professes the following dogma: a good Russia is a weak Russia." Any "international terrorism" that is larger in scope than a local rebel movement, "has always been and still remains an instrument in the Great Game," argued security expert Yegor Kholmogorov.

Isolated diplomatic incidents like granting political asylum to Chechen separatist leaders Akhmed Zakayev in Great Britain and Ilyas Akhmadov in the United States, and

the request of the Dutch Foreign Minister Bernard Bot to the Russian authorities, on behalf of the EU, to provide explanations on the immense loss of life in Beslan in September 2004, is framed by the Russian spin-doctors as a coordinated “campaign” of support for the Chechen terrorists, aimed at weakening Russia. In general, the terrorist attack, together with ambiguous assessments by the Western politicians and the press, were magnified in Russia to the extent of feeling “strategic isolation”. According to Kholmogorov, there is no international coalition: “Russia stands alone against the pack of big and small predators seeking to tear it to pieces.”

Finally, the mention of Russia’s nuclear weapons links this passage to yet another popular myth, that of Russia’s resources and power, which are the object of global envy. This feeds on the popular sentiment of humiliation, past glory, and the promise to restore this glory. Significantly, Putin used his September 4 speech to lament the collapse of the Soviet Union – “the colossal state and great power” – and took pride in the preservation of its core, the Russian Federation. A Russian inferiority complex symbolically compensates for geopolitical losses by overemphasizing the importance of the residual national assets – oil, territory and nuclear arms. (Although, in a rational economic calculation, at least the latter two should be regarded as a liability, and in terms of the post-industrial economy, oil is a liability as well.)

Summing up, there are three semantic elements to Putin’s statement:

- a popular theory of the anti-Russian conspiracy;
- memories of the recent diplomatic humiliations like the Akhmadov and Zakayev cases and the Bot incident;
- the myth of Russian power and resources, as symbolized by the nuclear deterrent.

These three elements have combined to produce a populist anti-Western diatribe, allowing Putin to touch base with the electorate while avoiding the painful question that the main responsibility for the Beslan disaster lies within Russia. This appears to be a well-calculated spin by the Kremlin. The message is addressed to two audiences, one in the West (don’t mess with Chechnya) and one at home (Russia is alone and surrounded by enemies; we have to stand united in the face of the global challenge). Being a purely rhetorical exercise, it most likely does not signify a drastic change in policy.

Multiple Others

A day after Putin’s speech, Russia’s proverbial spin-doctor, Gleb Pavlovsky, published an interview in which he called this address “the birth pangs of a nation”. Indeed, Putin’s statements can be interpreted as an attempt to construct a new Russian identity using the rhetoric of war and national mobilization, and the rituals of “othering.”

According to the political scientist Carl Schmitt, the nature of politics is “othering”, i.e. the imagination of a significant Other outside the bounds of the political community. The external Other (no matter whether real or imagined) shapes and unites the political community by posing an existential threat.

The various stages of “othering” in the post-Soviet Russia are symbolized by three hard-bitten thrillers by film director Alexei Balabanov, *Brother-1* (1996), *Brother-2* (1999), and *War* (2002). In the first one, the protagonist Danila Bagrov (played by Sergei Bodrov Jr.) is a Chechen war veteran who becomes an ideological contract killer in St. Petersburg, a Robin Hood of sorts, dealing out rough justice to gangsters and pimps. In *Brother-2*, Danila sets his feet on the American soil, fighting the local mafia in Chicago and ensuring the triumph of Russian values (“truth”) over the corrupt American ones (“money”). Finally, in the 2002 film *War*, Bodrov plays a shell-shocked soldier held hostage in Chechnya. The film is a nihilistic tale of revenge as a Russian soldier cuts a swathe through his former Chechen captors. The tragic death in September 2002 of Sergei Bodrov and his film crew under a collapsed glacier in the North Caucasus has ensured him a status of a post-Soviet James Dean, as well as ensuring cult status for his hero, a new Russian warrior, naïve, sentimental, and ruthless.

The three films map the evolution of the Russian mass consciousness: first, the Other is a criminal businessman of the early 1990s, then the Other is an American with his materialistic values, and finally the Other is a Chechen. Putin puts to use the multiple Others in his policy project, from persecuting the oligarchs to “wiping out” the terrorists and denouncing the West, playing the role of a symbolic Brother for the nation. In his Beslan address, Putin merges the image of the West with that of the international terrorism in one big Other, evoking the rhetoric of Russia’s strategic encirclement and a total War. He portrays Beslan and the alleged role of the West not as an isolated terrorist incident, but as an existential threat in which the survival of Russia is at stake.

Still, *War* should not be understood literally, as a policy guideline. Its use is primarily internal, an anchor of identity. The Hobbesian image of an ontological War requires a Hobbesian remedy of a Leviathan, the big State. Putin secures the new Russian identity not on waging war on the West, but on re-establishing the Russian State as a centerpiece of the Russian nation, and a key instrument in his project, the modernization of Russia.

Authoritarian Modernization

Paradoxically, Putin’s modernization priorities (as outlined, e.g., in his 1999 Millennium Address, or in the stated goal to double the GDP by 2010) have not been removed from the agenda by the Beslan events. Russia has ratified the Kyoto Protocol, presses ahead with the WTO membership, and the plans to privatize RAO EES and Gazprom are in place.

The modernizing agenda is pursued by administrative, bureaucratic and non-democratic means. The Kremlin has regarded Beslan as a convenient pretext to streamline the “administrative vertical,” and as a shortcut to the long-planned elimination of the last vestiges of pluralism – the single-mandate seats in the Duma, the gubernatorial elections, and the relatively independent print media.

Putin’s agenda has been called authoritarian modernization. It is a recurrent model in Russian history, from Peter the Great to Lenin and Stalin. It also has quite a few contemporary parallels, from Pinochet’s Chile and Park Chung Hee’s South Korea to Mahatir Mohammed’s Malaysia and Nazarbaev’s Kazakhstan. The mobilization and consolidation which Putin has called for in his Beslan address belong in this paradigm. It

takes a nation, united by a common threat (terrorism and the hostile West), driven by a common goal (preservation of the national unity and identity, finding a place in the global world), and governed by a single authority (the administrative vertical).

In this sense, Putin's address consolidates his domestic project, and completes a policy cycle of the past 12 months which started with Khodorkovsky's arrest in October 2003, was continued with the overhaul of the administrative apparatus (the Presidential Administration and the Government), and included the 2003 Duma elections and the 2004 presidential elections, orchestrated, managed and won by the Kremlin. The rituals of enemy construction, evoked by Putin in his speech, are a legitimizing act for the overwhelming administrative vertical built in the past 12 months.

Domestic Use Only

As far as foreign policy implications are concerned, there are surprisingly few. Putin's statements, and thinly veiled threats to those craving "juicy morsels," serve a predominantly domestic purpose: populism, identity formation and internal legitimization of his authoritarian-bureaucratic regime.

The implications of the address, if Putin's words are taken at face value and things are called their proper names, could be chilling. It is the governments of the United States and Great Britain that focus on Russia's "juicy morsels" (e.g. facilitating the breakup of the Soviet Union and sidelining Russia ever since). Yet they feel threatened by Russia's nuclear deterrent, and therefore their only recourse is to proxy means of terrorism. It is the U.S. and the UK that gave political asylum to Akhmedov and Zakayev (the UK has the added guilt of hosting Putin's arch-foe Boris Berezovsky). It is the United States that supports Saudi Arabia which, in turn, supports Chechen separatism. It is U.S. intelligence that helped capture two Russian agents in Qatar accused of assassinating the ex-President of the independent Chechnya, Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, in 2003. And the list goes on.

Still, the art of diplomacy is not about face values and proper names, but about hidden meanings and domestic contexts. As far as foreign policy is concerned, after George W. Bush's re-election (openly supported and welcomed by President Putin,) U.S.-Russian relations are likely to stay the course. Putin is confident that with Bush Jr. in the Oval Office, oil prices above \$40, and with the war on terrorism in full swing, he has considerable leeway in relations with the United States, and can afford the anti-American and anti-Western statements like the ones in his Beslan address.

Indeed, the three months since Beslan have not shown any significant deterioration in relations between Russia and the West, with the exception of the stalled EU-Russia dialogue (but here, the problems are of a structural nature, and date back far beyond Beslan). The most likely ramifications of Beslan for Russian foreign policy will be felt on the Southern front (the Caucasus and Central Asia) and, broadly speaking, in Russia's greater assertiveness in the Commonwealth of Independent States (as exemplified by Russia's unceremonious meddling in the Ukrainian elections). Moscow will exert greater pressure on its southern neighbors, as its heavy-handed involvement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has recently shown.

The bottom line is that global affairs are increasingly following the familiar script of geopolitics. In foreign policy, this means spheres of influence, power politics and the use of military force. On the domestic front, this entails enemy construction, national mobilization and war rhetoric, as Bush's election campaign and Putin's Beslan address have shown. The difference is, the United States has strong democratic institutions and a rooted civil society which will let it remain a liberal democracy even under the conditions of the war on terrorism. Russia, sadly, lacks both strong institutions and a civil society, and the geopolitical twist in the world politics may further consolidate Putin's bureaucratic authoritarianism.

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