

# From Dubrovka to Beslan: Who is learning faster?

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The social, political, and religious causes and characteristics of modern terrorism have become the object of heightened political attention and the subject for heated academic discussions. No country in the world seems to have a ready-made recipe for guaranteeing success in dealing with mass hostage crises. The 'softer' the targets of large-scale hostage operations, the more politically and morally sensitive and the more complicated the task of resolving a crisis becomes.

These concerns were certainly on the minds of many of the world's political leaders and security professionals at the time and in the aftermath of the Beslan tragedy, Russia's most severe hostage crisis thus far. There is little doubt that what happened in Beslan was, in many ways, a worst-case scenario raising endless political, tactical, and ethical questions. The ability of the radical militants not only to proceed with attacks against civilians in the North Caucasus region and to mount series of deadly terrorist acts outside of the region, but to increase terrorist activity to the unprecedented level of Beslan indicates that the Russian state in general and security agencies in particular face grave problems in maintaining law and order and combating terrorism. There was no shortage of harsh foreign and domestic critiques of the handling of the Beslan crisis in Russia. While some of these assessments did contain constructive criticism, many inappropriate attempts were also made to exploit the tragedy for the sake of political and ideological goals. The broader political and security measures announced or undertaken by the federal authorities in the aftermath of the crisis raised even more questions.

Less attention has been paid, however, to what the Beslan crisis in Russia may tell us about how to deal with hostage crises of this scale. While Russia's situation has its own specifics, no country in the world is absolutely safe against terrorist acts of that scale, particularly if it is engaged in any form of asymmetrical armed conflict, whether on its own territory or far abroad.

Thus, the primary focus here will not be on the broader political implications of the crisis and its role as a trigger for ambitious administrative and federal reforms in Russia, but rather, on the measures more specifically tailored to combat terrorism and the lessons learned from the hostage crisis and the rescue operation for counter-terrorism. Could something be done better in responding to future attacks of this scale? How fast are the terrorists themselves learning from past hostage crises? Can broader lessons be gleaned from Russia's worst-case experience by other states and security forces to allow them to

more effectively prevent, preempt and respond to a comparable crisis? While conflicting accounts and contradictory information about the crisis limit our ability to answer these questions, some preliminary conclusions can be made.

## **Lessons Learned from Previous Hostage Crises**

As the September 2004 events in Beslan were not the first mass hostage crisis in Russia, comparisons with the October 2002 Nord-Ost tragedy in the Dubrovka theater complex in Moscow and public complaints about the inability of the state to prevent new major hostage crises were practically unavoidable. In Beslan, as in the case of Dubrovka, failures in prevention, pre-emptive disruption and interdiction occurred. But claims that Russia's state and security services learned no lessons whatsoever both from Dubrovka and earlier hostage crises, are not justified.

Of the several lessons learned from a series of large scale hostage crises of the mid-1990s, two are particularly worth mentioning. First, the hostage crises of the mid-90s had once again proven that giving in to terrorists' tactical and strategic demands in the long term only makes the situation worse and provokes further and larger terrorist attacks. An example of this was Shamil Basayev's June 1995 raid on a hospital in Budenovsk. Officials guaranteed the perpetrators' escape in exchange for the release of some hostages, yet 129 persons were killed. Another example was the January 1996 hostage situation at a hospital in Kizlyar followed by a clash with the perpetrators at Pervomaiskaya. This resulted in a hasty and inherently problematic cease fire agreement that was signed under strong political and security pressures, but was not backed by genuine political will on either side. Secondly, in contrast to the flawed experience of the mid-90s when top officials directly interfered in operational matters, during the comparable crises of the early 2000s, neither the President nor other top officials, interfered in counter-terrorist staff's operational planning and implementation.

The impact of the Dubrovka crisis (where more than 800 people were taken hostage and 130 of them later died), on Russia's way of dealing with the next crisis in Beslan was reflected by the authorities' reluctance to mount a major assault at the early stages of the crisis and their strong preference for exhausting all available options to save the lives of the hostages and proceed with talks, rather than running the risk of a surprise rescue operation with the use of unorthodox techniques. If a storming operation were to be conducted in Beslan, it had to be more thoroughly prepared this time. As proof of this, during the siege, special units were conducting a training operation on a similar building outside the city limits.

## **The Terrorists' Tactics**

While the Beslan tragedy stands out for its particular cruelty, it was part of an series of major terrorist attacks in Russia in late 2004, along with the two passenger planes blown up on August 24 and a suicide bombing attack near the entrance to a Moscow subway station on August 31. It also bore a set of characteristics that is increasingly becoming a hallmark of large-scale terrorist attacks in Russia: a combination of terrorists' fierce determination and level of preparation for an attack with their relatively unclear declared

political goals that do not appear to reflect the real underlying political motivations behind the assault.

The Beslan terrorists were certainly well-prepared for the assault, the siege, and a potential rescue operation. Among other things, pre-planted weapons and explosives were hidden beneath the school's floorboards during renovation work over the summer. Their high level of determination was evident when they did not hesitate to kill people early in the assault and to shoot most male hostages later. They were able to continue fierce armed resistance hours into the rescue operation, even though the hostage situation was not necessarily meant to be a suicide mission for all of the perpetrators. While in the process of talks, the scale and feasibility of the demands formulated by the terrorists gave the impression that the demands were not necessarily the main purpose of the hostage operation. Some examples of the demands by the hostage takers were the release of militants arrested after the June 2004 armed raid on Ingushetia, meeting the presidents and other officials of Ingushetia, North Ossetia and other officials, and the withdrawal of Russia from Chechnya. A set of even broader undeclared political goals was plausible, from sparking a new interethnic strife and undermining the fragile governance system in the already torn North Caucasus region to dealing a major blow to the credibility of the federal government and presidential administration. The Beslan crisis has once again demonstrated the growing paradox: while the number of terrorist attacks in Russia and their lethality has been steadily increasing over the recent years, the attacks have become increasingly counterproductive if weighed against the perpetrators declared political goals – a prima facie case to question the authenticity of the terrorists' motivations.

This growing gap between terrorists' declared and real political motivations becomes all the more disturbing as they also appear to be learning fast from the past experience of both their own large-scale activities and counter-terrorist responses. The lessons learned from the handling of the Dubrovka crisis by those who planned and implemented the Beslan hostage operation were not limited to tactical and technical details. Perhaps more significantly, it appears that in the planning of the Beslan operation, the terrorists' analysis of previous experience allowed them to more or less accurately predict the way the situation would evolve and to almost count on a particular form that the state's reaction to the crisis was likely to take.

## **The Rescue Operation**

At the siege stage, the situation around the school in Beslan was not chaotic. Rather, it could be described as a standoff complicated by the presence of local armed civilians. Later on, however, the situation became even more complicated by the rapidly unfolding chain of events. All indications suggest that the rescue operation was directly provoked by at least two powerful explosions at the school that went off before the assault as the Emercom rescue workers and paramedics were allowed to collect dead bodies outside the school in an area controlled by terrorists. As a result of one of the explosions, part of the roof of the building collapsed killing some of the hostages while others took the explosions and the following gunfire as a signal to flee. The fleeing hostages were under fire from their captors and the spetsnaz opened fire in reply over the heads of the hostages and started to advance toward the school. Despite conflicting evidence regarding this

stage of the crisis, two things can be stated with a great degree of confidence: first of all, nothing on earth could have justified non-intervention by the security forces at that point as they sought to secure the escape of the hostages and secondly, it was practically unavoidable that hostages, armed locals, and special forces themselves would be caught in the cross-fire.

These factors certainly affected the operation's outcome. On the one hand, the level of casualties and the fact that the rescue operation lasted for over 12 hours are far from signs of operational success. Out of more than 1100 hostages, 338 people died, including at least 172 children; only about 10 percent of all hostages escaped uninjured. On the other hand, the relatively high level of casualties for the Alfa and Vypel Special Forces (with at least 10 commandos dead and 26 wounded) was arguably among the heaviest losses in the groups' history, and which demonstrated the level of tension and the complexity of the situation. It must be noted that, in contrast to some critical foreign assessments, in Russia, despite the general feeling of despair and helplessness about the way things developed in Beslan, it is widely believed that the special forces did their best and that hardly anyone could have done more to save the lives of the hostages. As for the 58th Army personnel, their role was limited, as it should have been, to support functions which included de-mining. By all accounts, the weakest point of the entire operational handling of the crisis was the inability to set and enforce an effective security perimeter around the school. This task was the responsibility of the republican and federal interior forces and other Ministry of Interior structures and was not effectively implemented, making it possible for three to five thousand local civilians, some of them armed with hunting rifles and other light weapons, to be able to break a thin police cordon once the rescue operation began. The presence of armed civilians on the ground proved to be one of the most controversial factors of the entire handling of the crisis. Arguably, the security perimeter would have been much more effectively enforced if a similar crisis had unfolded in downtown Moscow or even in a southern town with a predominantly Russian population, rather than in a North Caucasus environment where most people de facto possess arms. The problem was complicated by the fact that every family had members taken hostage in the local school and public compliance and cordons were extremely hard to be sustained. Also, the heavy death toll from previous large-scale hostage crises and the specific pressures of the Beslan case re-enforced the feeling among the people in favor of self-protection. The fact that the locals were at hand to carry stretchers, bring food and water, and drive the victims to hospitals in their private cars did save some lives. At the same time, there were numerous reports that civilians did not strictly obey the order to hold fire during the siege and that in the course of the rescue operation their fragmented gunfire may have accidentally hurt both hostages and security personnel. Also, while some civilians were wearing white armbands to distinguish themselves from gunmen, their presence facilitated the terrorists' attempts to blend in with the former hostages and crowd. While some perpetrators remained in the school when the fighting broke out, others sought to escape southward into the town, changed into civilian clothing prior to the first explosion, and later tried to mix in with the hostages.

Apart from political calculations, one of the tactical reasons for terrorists to choose a North Caucasus town, rather than Moscow or any predominantly Russian town as an operational ground for a large-scale hostage taking assault may have been precisely the

expectation that the practically unavoidable presence of local armed civilians would inevitably help sow chaos in the surrounding area. This assumption is not ungrounded as the doubts about whether the perpetrators' efforts were facilitated from the outset of the crisis by a group of their accomplices operating outside the school and whether the explosions were accidental or a deliberate part of an escape plan.

## **Conclusion**

While it is almost inevitable that terrorist groups would learn faster from both successful and flawed past experiences than state structures, as they are generally more mobile and flexible entities, the state must be fully aware of this reality and be prepared to deal with it.

The Beslan terrorists appeared not just to have learned their lessons from previous major attacks, but also to have made accurate assessments of the lessons likely to be gleaned by the security services from the same experiences. In particular, as demonstrated by Beslan, terrorists expected the security and political thinking and methods to be disproportionately influenced by the Dubrovka Nord-Ost crisis. It appeared that the perpetrators almost counted on the state to be prepared to wait as long as necessary and to refrain from launching a rescue operation before all other options were exhausted in order to try to prevent the massive loss of human life on the scale of the Dubrovka crisis. Using this framework it is plausible that the explosions that provoked the rescue operation were not accidental and could have been intentionally used by perpetrators to dictate their own timing of a breakthrough operation by provoking a rescue operation while preparing to retreat in the resulting chaos.

While the Nord-Ost factor has helped to prevent the state from taking risky decisions motivated primarily by political necessity to put an end to the crisis in Beslan, it added to the general indecisiveness of authorities at all levels. This indecisiveness was further aggravated by the particularly sensitive nature of the crisis, the involvement of a great number of children. As noted above, the perpetrators could almost count on the state refraining from seizing the initiative early in the crisis and hesitating to undertake surprise attacks. This leads us to the following question: when does a particular lesson learned start to affect the thinking and practical actions of the political leadership and the security forces to the point of limiting their ability to respond to new terrorist attacks rather than enhancing it? There is a difference between an impact of a certain event on the future policy and a lesson learned from that event. So far, we have mainly observed the impact of each of the previous major hostage crises, in particular the crisis in the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow, rather than lessons learned from that experience and creatively applied to the new hostage crises.