

# Has Russia Achieved a Victory in Its War Against Terror?

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*Pavel K. Baev*

*International Peace Research Institute (PRIO), Oslo*

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Russia launched its own war against terror in September 1999 when the country, shocked by twin bomb attacks in Moscow, made a contract with newly appointed prime minister Vladimir Putin. He promised to exterminate the threat and accepted responsibility for a war not of his making. This was certainly a risk on Putin's part, and the probability that uncontrollable generals would mishandle the campaign was uncomfortably high. Putin gambled, however, and won; his first crucial victory was achieved in March 2000, when former president Boris Yeltsin's plan for a controlled transfer of power to Putin was validated at the ballot box.

This fairly common interpretation of President Putin's electoral triumph as a victory in Russia's war against terror illustrates perfectly how logically inconsistent and strategically vague the term actually is. At the time, Moscow preferred to downplay its activity as a counterterrorist operation, not a war, while advancing grander claims about shielding Western civilization against an undefined "rising evil." These ambitions appeared quite absurd up until the watershed of September 11, 2001, when the standard discourse of international relations abruptly changed and Russia eagerly joined the U.S.-led global antiterrorist coalition. On the domestic front, the notion of war was introduced only after the September 2004 terrorist attack in Beslan, North Ossetia, when Putin established a link between the terrorists who attacked a school in Beslan and Russia's old enemies who were still coveting some of the country's "juicy morsels."

Attempts to conceptualize this new hybrid kind of war were not encouraged by the pragmatic Kremlin, which proclaimed victory when it saw fit but left its definition as vague as Soviet leaders once did the "victory of Communism." A year ago, asking the question of whether Russia had achieved victory in its war against terror would have clearly evoked a negative response; now, however, it seems possible and useful to raise

the question in earnest. This requires the patient removal of multiple layers of official half-truths and blatant lies, as well as narrowing the definition of the war to mean the countering of the direct challenge of terrorism by military means.

## **Russia's Three Counterterrorist Fronts**

Putin has shown great skill in using the struggle against terrorism to achieve various political aims. This analysis leaves these aside, however, to focus on the specific goals of the war against terror, as they are related to three interconnected theaters. The first of these theaters is Moscow, where every attack immediately acquires enormous political resonance. Russia's capital has a rich milieu of organized crime and political extremism. Up until mid-2006, however, it was possible to assert, even despite gaps in evidence, that terrorism was driven exclusively by the Chechen connection.

The second theater was Chechnya itself, where the aims gradually shifted from defeating the rebels, to forceful policing, to sharing the burden of patrolling with local paramilitaries, and, finally, to transferring responsibility for enforcing order to pro-Russian collaborators. The model of "Chechenization," based on the local distribution of massive reconstruction aid from Moscow, has included as a key element an antiguerrilla strategy that tempts the rebels to change sides by cutting individual deals and allowing them join new government battalions.

The third theater, the North Caucasus, grew in significance after the strategy of isolating the war zone in Chechnya faltered and numerous sources of instability emerged across the region. Until the June 2004 rebel raid on Nazran, Ingushetia, Moscow was slow to respond to this challenge, and its experiments with pro-active counterterrorist strikes proved counterproductive. A more promising avenue lay in strengthening the loyalty of local leaders. Having cancelled regional elections, however, the Kremlin could only secure loyalty by disbursing federal funds. Pumping increased amounts of money into official coffers and thereby fuelling corruption was hardly a sustainable method for de-escalating complicated local problems.

The operational balance sheets on all three counterterrorist fronts currently look far more promising than one year ago. Moscow experienced a horrifying sequence of suicide bombings after the hostage drama at the city's Nord-Ost theater in October 2002, but these stopped abruptly in the summer of 2004. At present, terrorism is associated with xenophobic nationalism and with a new wave of contract killings, not the Chechen resistance. No other major city in Russia has seen a major terrorist attack; normal life in St. Petersburg was disrupted only by a preventive counterterrorist operation launched in advance of the July 2006 G8 summit.

In Chechnya itself, "victory" remains an ambiguous term. Despite a pattern of explosions and ambushes, the situation has essentially stabilized, but through a centrally-organized terror that only state propaganda can describe as normalization. The model of "Chechenization" has narrowed down to "Ramzanization," a cult of personality surrounding the cheerful young gangster Ramzan Kadryov, who holds all key levers of power in the republic and still demands more. This development hardly fits into any definition of Russian victory.

As for the North Caucasus, the picture remains mixed, and a decline in terrorist activity has still not acquired the character of a clear trend. Since the October 2005 Nalchik attack, Dmitry Kozak, the presidential envoy in the Southern Federal District, has succeeded in normalizing the situation in Kabardino-Balkaria by replacing key government officials. He also achieved some success in defusing the implosion of Dagestan. By autumn 2006, it was only the situation within Ingushetia that remained seriously outside Moscow's control.

## **A Limited War**

If in the North Caucasus a breakthrough is by no means evident, within the Kremlin's towers, a triumphal mood is exceedingly apparent. The leadership of the Federal Security Service (FSB), which had previously been generous in sharing the responsibility for combating terrorism with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, is now ready to abandon caution and stake out its exclusive right to bring the war against terror to a victorious close. The National Anti-Terrorist Committee (NAC), formed in February 2006 under the chairmanship of Nikolai Patrushev, seeks to secure the FSB's lead in concluding the war against terror and to guarantee its dominance over other power structures.

It is impossible to verify the assumption that victory is near. Data provided by the NAC include the unhelpful assertion that 708 terrorist attacks have been prevented, including 26 in the first half of 2006. Most other information remains incongruous and anecdotal.

At the same time, it is possible to identify several distinctive but counterintuitive features of the ongoing terrorist campaign which suggest that the war against terror is not necessarily over. The current pause may be less due to the efficiency of countermeasures, which have typically had a stronger impact on limiting or expanding the recruitment pool for terrorists than on disrupting their operations, and more to the fact that the rebels themselves have chosen to limit their attacks. After the destruction of two apartment houses in September 1999, there were only a few minor attacks in Moscow until the Nord-Ost hostage drama in 2002, which triggered a 20-month-long wave of suicide bombings. Among the invariably soft targets of the rebels, there have been hardly any objects of symbolic significance. There have also been no attempts to target the city's numerous chemical factories or storage facilities – even though a successful attack would have an impact comparable to the use of a weapon of mass destruction – or to disrupt vulnerable city infrastructure.

In the North Caucasus, an explosive combination of terrorism, protracted guerrilla war, and smoldering conflicts has also resulted in surprisingly few regional attacks. The vulnerable rear echelons of federal forces spread over a vast territory from Volgograd to Rostov-on-Don have been targeted far less than one would expect. The rich tourism infrastructure from the Black Sea beaches of Sochi to the ski resorts near Elbrus has not been attacked once, going against the pattern observed in the global war against terror, whether in Indonesia, Egypt, or Turkey. Putin mentioned such a threat during a brief appearance in Dagestan in mid-2005, perhaps reflecting on his own retreat in Krasnaya Polyana; however, violence against tourists, including kidnappings, has been extremely

rare. There have also been no significant attacks on the region's highly vulnerable energy infrastructure, namely the Tengiz-Novorossiisk pipeline and the oil terminals in Novorossiisk and Tuapse. There were several explosions on "non-strategic" gas pipelines in Dagestan, but the January 2006 blasts that left Georgia without gas and electricity for a week stand out as an exception to the rule.

Each of these omissions can probably be rationalized with the virtue of hindsight, but in sum they lead to the conclusion that the rebels have conducted their combination of guerilla operations and terrorism as a limited war. Their alternative to accepting defeat may yet be to revise some of these limits.

## Things that Could Go Wrong

A major factor behind Moscow's success in its war against terror is luck, often unusually lasting. With oil prices, Russia has been lucky beyond all expectations, and the windfall of petro-rubles has allowed for a massive increase in federal subsidies to the North Caucasus. Russia has also benefited from the crises in the Middle East and Afghanistan, where demand for seasoned fighters with experience in Chechnya has been boosted by the war in Lebanon, escalation of intercommunal strife in Iraq, and the Taliban's revival. Meanwhile, the supply of funds for the Chechen cause has probably shrunk. Finally, a real stroke of luck was the July 2006 explosion, most likely accidental, that claimed the life of the elusive archterrorist Shamil Basayev. He personified Chechen defiance and used his authority to connect various terrorist cells, Islamic networks, and criminal groupings; his death could signify an important watershed in the violent unrest across the North Caucasus.

It is entirely possible that Putin's luck will change during the last months of his term; it is perhaps more useful, however, to examine the things that can go wrong even if his lucky run continues. The fundamental deficiency in the stabilization of the North Caucasus today is its narrow basis within local societies. Reconstruction and rehabilitation are almost exclusively based on resources provided by the federal budget; this inflow has acquired such a scale that many local enterprises have become dysfunctional, as the only sphere of profitable activity is the bureaucratic redistribution of unaccountable funds. The lifecycle of neopatrimonial regimes is further shortened by rampant corruption, to which the reshuffling of cadres can provide only a short respite. Under Putin, a strong connection has been established between counterterrorism and counterrevolution, building on cases like Andijon and Nalchik in 2005. However, a new wave of public discontent is still possible in places as dissimilar as Adyghea, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Kalmykia, which inevitably puts the whole construct of centrally-provided "happiness" at risk, even without a domino effect.

Another weak link is the dependency of the stabilization strategy on a small number of key figures, especially Dmitry Kozak, who has been outperforming all members of Putin's team. Although Kozak has many enemies in the region, the greater risk to his power stems from Kremlin intrigues that may eventually compromise Kozak and deny him access to the presidential ear. As well, the fragile political balance in Dagestan rests on the shoulders of the elderly Mukhu Aliyev. Ingushetia is a case study of how a bad choice of local leader can have truly disastrous consequences. Finally, in the league of

troublemakers, Ramzan Kadyrov has no peers; Moscow obviously has no clue how to control this political Frankenstein.

The last entry in this short list of things that can go wrong is a possible blunder of Moscow's own making. An opportunity for this has been created by the relative stabilization in Chechnya, which has left the Russian leadership with spare military capabilities. While not vast, these are nevertheless of some use. Moscow's 2002 ultimatum to Georgia to liquidate Chechen rebels in the Pankisi Gorge or risk attack had to be withdrawn, at least in part due to a lack of free battalions. Now, however, Russia has combat-capable units based in the North Caucasus Military District that can be deployed on short notice. In Central Asia, Russia shows little interest in using its military power, even when circumstances appear right; neither Tajikistan nor Kyrgyzstan, despite hosting Russian military bases, can be considered a front in Russia's war against terror. Georgia, however, is a different matter. The chain of emotional quarrels and scandals, Putin's intense acrimony toward the point of origin of all color revolutions, and Georgia's irreconcilable tensions with Abkhazia and South Ossetia intertwine to form a political trap that may be avoided only by exercising great caution. With the military instruments available, the temptation to cut the Georgian knot could prove to be too strong.