Russians as Terrorist Victims

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Russia has been dealing with terrorist actions since the late 20th century (as well as much earlier in its history if one goes back to the People's Will movement of the late 19th century) and on a similar scale to the atrocities conducted in Paris by ISIS. The terrorism in its earlier phase was a reaction to the initially disastrous intervention in Chechnya, authorised by first Russian president Boris Yeltsin in December 1994. Several bombs exploding in apartment blocks in distant parts of Russia in 1999 were never satisfactorily explained. A common opinion is that they were carried out by the FSB to encourage support for a renewal of the assault on Chechnya, which took place in late 1999. In September 2001, after the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, Russia's president offered a united front with the United States in a common cause against terrorism: Chechens were linked to the extremists that carried out the attacks on the World Trade Center. At that time, President George W. Bush had claimed to have looked into Putin's eyes and got 'a sense of his soul'.

The following years brought horrific attacks by Chechen terrorists. In October 2002, forty terrorists led by Movsar Barayev held hostage a packed house of 912 at the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow, with women clad in back carrying suicide bombs on their waists. Russian security forces responded by pumping gas into the theatre. The result was the death of all the terrorists but also of 130 hostages. The response was conducted in such secrecy that ambulances could not approach the theatre to assist the victims because of cars parked throughout the neighbourhood. An even more savage attack took place in September 2004 in the North Ossetian town of Beslan, this time at a school on the first day of term. The attackers were under the leadership of Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev (1965-2006), who demanded the removal of Russian forces from Chechnya. The siege lasted three days, with terrified schoolchildren and their teachers held captive.

Once again Putin authorised extreme force, with security forces storming the school, backed up by tanks and sections of the Russian army. Of the 1100 hostages, 385 were killed, roughly half of whom were children. The escape of Basayev and other terrorists further marred the operation. Subsequently, Moscow was put into the sort of lockdown that took place in Brussels over the weekend of 20-22 November 2015 as the authorities mounted a frantic search for terrorists. The Russian response appeared to carry a clear message: no concessions to and no agreements with terrorists. The violence may be equated with the personal methods of the president, which were mirrored by the Russian army's ruthless tactics in the recalcitrant republic. The subsequent alliance with Ramzan Kadyrov, who took over the Chechen presidency in 2007, brought together two like-minded leaders and reduced, though it did not end, the attacks on civilians.

Russian Citizens as Victims

After the disappearance of the Russian airliner over Egypt, the Russian leadership appeared reluctant to acknowledge a terrorist act, perhaps because such a revelation would bring back memories of an earlier era in which

the government had appeared largely helpless to prevent such assaults. Prior to the event, Russian air strikes over Syria had targeted militants directly adjacent to the area still under the control of the Syrian government rather than those occupied by ISIS.

Western reports criticised Russia for its defence of President Assad, but were largely bemused by the sudden switch of priorities in Moscow from eastern Ukraine and Crimea to the Middle East. Yet it is not illogical. Russia has been an ally of Syria (albeit in its Soviet guise) since the 1950s. The potential loss of a reliable ally was seen as another Western intrusion into areas Russia considered within its purview. Moreover, there seemed to be possibilities of forming a common cause against ISIS that might appeal to the West and bring an end to the sanctions imposed on Russia because of its actions in Ukraine.

Throughout the 21st century, Russian citizens have been the main victims of the government's policies. Whether they are reluctant army conscripts fighting in an area they considered fraternal, or hostages of terrorist attacks, or passengers on a civilian airliner, they have borne the brunt of Putin's hardline approach to politics. The macho image that the president likes to perpetuate – even to the extent of including the very non-macho Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev at a weightlifting session in late August – pervades foreign policy: the notion of being strong and defending one's own, however narrowly that may be defined.

He has survived to date because the image of masculinity, though sometimes ridiculed, has been mostly successful. It is the perception of a powerful state that prevails rather than the reality, but the latter is in any case shrouded in ritualistic propaganda about the devious manoeuvres of the West, and how the US controls and even chooses the Ukrainian government.

But outside Russia, its citizens are often linked directly with the government. One synopsis is that if Russians love Putin, then they must support his policies; that comment falls short on several fronts, not least an understanding of the nature of Russian foreign policy, which is precisely its indefinability.

An authoritarian state, which is an appropriate way to describe the Russian Federation since 2000, must convince its residents that the dangerous world necessitates extreme measures: the advance of NATO into the former Communist East, Western intrusions into Ukraine, EU approaches to Ukraine that exclude Russia, and of course terrorist attacks. Enemies are everywhere. As a result, Russians must support a strong leader and be prepared to make sacrifices.

In reality, however, Russia has no clearly defined policy. Without doubt it has moved far from the pro-Western stance of the early 1990s. Yet it is easiest to perceive its recent activities as kneejerk responses to problems as they arise, which was the case with the sudden takeover of Crimea, following Ukrainian protesters that resulted in the flight of President Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014.

Western Sympathy

None of this should preclude Western sympathy for the victims of Metrojet flight 9268. The victims of terrorism are not responsible for crimes, real or perceived, of their government, particularly one over which they have little or no control, and which has no moderating influences in Parliament or the courts.

Likewise, the perception of Russians per se as intrinsically linked to the government in Moscow is also a false one. They are not inherently imperialist or chauvinistic. Moreover, the handful of oligarchs aside, for the past quarter century they have been subjected to bewildering transformations that have undermined their security, depleted savings, impoverished the majority, and left them wanting only stability and an opportunity to live and raise families in peace and with the means to do so.

The destruction of the Russian airliner is a clear indicator that even under the current regime Russians are still vulnerable to random attacks. Yet many still place faith in Putin as the only leader who can offer some semblance of order, in contrast to the fumbling Yeltsin who left the country in financial crisis, or for that matter, Mikhail Gorbachev

whose leadership ended with the Soviet empire in ruins.

Democracy and the pro-Western policies of the late 1980s and early 1990s are seen as an unhappy failed experiment, and kowtowing to Western demands. And while many Western analysts think Putin is not the answer, many Russians have to be convinced otherwise. If we are ever to co-exist in peace and with mutual understanding, we could begin by mourning the victims of flight 9268 as a signal that Russian victims are no less important than others.

About the author:

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