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A new generation of militants strikes Moscow

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Although no groups have as yet claimed responsibility for the two suicide attacks the Russian security services, the FSB, have indicated that groups linked to the North Caucasus may have been behind the bombings at the Lubyanka and Park Kultury metro stations in Moscow.

Over the last eleven years, federal policies towards the North Caucasus have been enveloped in a broader process of political reform, in which power has been centralised around the Kremlin. The Russian policy towards the North Caucasus – under the current President Dmitry Medvedev, and his predecessor Vladimir Putin – has remained hard-line. Unchecked irredentism and more recently Islamic radicalism have, at least according to official statements, been quashed through the overwhelming use of military force. As part of this policy, the Russian public has been encouraged to recognise that stability has been brought back to the region, echoing long-standing traditions of enforced military subjugation. This has been linked directly to the popularity of President Putin, the rebirth of Russia on the world stage, and salvation from the threat posed by Islamic terrorism. In the short-term then, Putin's intransigent policy towards the North Caucasus led to a measure of stability, mistakenly becoming considered as one front in the global war on terror after 9/11. But in the longer term this masked widespread discontent, in effect radicalising remnants of the Chechen separatist movement, creating an environment in which a North Caucasus' insurgency could gain momentum.

Of course Chechnya and some parts of the North Caucasus have undergone a radical transformation, following years of war. But the story of stabilisation betrays pervasive poverty, commonplace corruption and growing anti-Russian sentiments that have resurfaced in the North Caucasus in recent years. Together this has produced a new generation of militants which have swelled the ranks of the insurgency.

The hard-line policies have included the use of local strongmen carefully placed by the Kremlin to illicit support for federal reforms. Unaccountable, the local pro-Kremlin authorities have enforced control using brutal measures, limiting freedoms and crushing independent coverage of the region. Throughout 2008 wide spread human rights abuses, corruption, arrests and extra-judicial killings, along with sporadic attacks by insurgents, highlighted that simmering tensions in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan remained unresolved.

And yet in April 2009, as if to demonstrate that irredentism had been finally defeated, Russia officially ended its counter-terror operation in Chechnya. Shortly afterwards, and largely unreported, local Ingush and Chechen officials – directed by Moscow – organised a number of new counter-terror zones to target the growing insurgency that had beset the region. The policy served a dual purpose, at once demonstrating to the Russian public and the international community that federal policies had been successful, shifting attention away from the region, while also placing responsibility for countering regional instability firmly in the hands of the local administrations. At around the same time, the leader of the North Caucasus insurgency, Doku Umarov, announced the revival of a battalion of suicide bombers, the Riyad us-Saliheyn – who would be deployed to attack federal targets. Thereafter the Riyad us-Saliheyn launched a number of audacious attacks against the pro-Kremlin authorities, killing scores of policemen in a series of attacks in Ingushetia, in Chechnya, and at the start of this year in Dagestan. The militant campaign included suicide attacks directed against the Russian-appointed Ingush President, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, and purportedly, an attack directed against Ramzan Kadyrov, the current President of Chechnya and keystone in the federal campaign designed to normalise Russian relations in the restive North Caucasus. And so, while the Russian public may have been sold a different story, the situation in the Southern republics is far from being resolved.

The attacks on the Moscow metro stations appear to be retaliatory – following the death of two important figures in the insurgency in recent weeks. If the attacks are attributable to insurgents from the North Caucasus, they mark a dramatic escalation in the dirty war in the North Caucasus. But perhaps more tellingly, they highlight the need for the Kremlin to become more accountable for the systematic human rights abuses that are commonplace in the region, to address widespread poverty and corruption, and to recognise how their policies may well have helped to re-ignite simmering tensions, which have in part produced a multi-ethnic insurgency with a capability and willingness to strike at civilian targets in the Russian capital, Moscow.

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