

Odessa File 2012

By [Richard Lourie](#)

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It would be a mistake to dismiss the recent foiled plot to assassinate Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as no more than a cheesy, cynical pre-election stunt. Waiting to release the news until the week of the election was cheesy and cynical, but the three suspected bomb makers working in Odessa were all too real. Some suggest that they were only hired to settle some scores in the world of Odessa business. But why import Chechens from the United Arab Emirates and London — especially when they weren't masters of their craft as proved by the explosion in their lab that killed one and injured the other two?

The fact that the suspects proved to be inept hardly means that they weren't planning to assassinate Putin and that the whole business was just a clumsy FSB charade. The shoe and underwear bombers in the United States also proved inept, but they came close to carrying out their lethal missions.

One of the blast's two survivors, Adam Osmayev, a 31-year-old Chechen who had been living in London and was wanted in connection with an earlier bomb plot, denied any intention of being a suicide bomber but said that the other Chechen — Ruslan Madayev, 26, and the one

who died in the explosion — was willing to die.

On Feb. 3, the leader of the Chechen rebels, Doku Umarov, declared a major tactical shift because the huge demonstrations in Moscow and elsewhere had proved that the Russian people were against what he called Putin's "Chekist regime." Therefore, civilians should no longer be targeted. But police, army, security personnel and, of course, Putin himself remain legitimate targets. With many fewer targets, the attacks on targetable personnel would most likely increase. In fact, two weeks after Umarov's declaration, rebels killed 17 Chechen officers and wounded 24 in their second major attack of the year.

The Caucasus has also heated up in connection with Iran's nuclear program. On Feb. 13 in Tbilisi, Georgian police defused a bomb on the car of an Israeli Embassy employee. On Feb. 21, Azeri authorities arrested a suspected terrorist group allegedly working for Iran's secret services.

It can't be ruled out that the Odessa suspects had a different mission — perhaps a plot to kill Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov or to attack Israeli diplomats in Ukraine — and then were coerced into confessing to plotting against Putin.

This is a murky affair and, most likely, it will remain so. But two things are fairly clear. One is that trouble in Russia's restive south is not going away, especially when the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi offer an ideal opportunity to humiliate Putin. Another is that if Putin fails to understand Russia's new situation where there is something like the beginning of real politics, he will create increasingly polarized conditions in which assassination attempts could become more frequent. His recent comments that Russia's enemies might "whack" one of his opponents and then blame it on the authorities won't help matters in the least.

The incident in Odessa will recede into historical insignificance if Putin himself does not prove inept at managing the explosive give-and-take that now marks the country's political and social life. However, if he does prove incapable, what may result is a 21st-century version of Marquis de Custine's famous description of early 19th-century Russian government as "an absolute monarchy tempered by assassination."

Richard Lourie is the author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

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