

Kremlin Fanning Ethnic And Religious Tensions

By [Nikolai Petrov](#)

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Last week's murder of a respected spiritual leader in Dagestan, a recent terrorist attack in Kazan and overall tensions in Muslim-dominated regions point to what could become an avalanche of problems. The Kazan attack alone prompted a campaign against suspected adherents of Wahhabism and possible plans for the Federal Security Service to closely monitor Muslims in general. But the bureaucratic zeal of the reformed police force might wreak more havoc than a host of terrorists.

Vigilantes may join the fray, escalating the potential for conflict. Dagestani leader Magomedsalam Magomedov has called for the organization of self-defense squads, "teams of young people who are ready to work under the guidance of the Interior Ministry to provide domestic security." The Dagestani Interior Ministry has welcomed the idea. Local authorities have suggested that the groups be composed of Murids, disciples of the late sheik Said Atsayev. Such a move could unleash a low-intensity civil war in Dagestan.

This summer, Krasnodar Governor Alexander Tkachyov suggested organizing armed groups — composed of Cossacks. In fact, his initiative was not the first; other regions have revived the idea of using Cossack units to maintain order. Calls have also recently been made to form "Orthodox squads" in response to vandalized crosses and the desecration of Russian Orthodox churches.

The Kremlin, meanwhile, has used the Pussy Riot case as an ideological tool, defending traditional and Russian Orthodox values in a bid to consolidate its conservative electorate. But in doing so, it has polarized society and provoked the radicalization of opposing camps. That polarization is only heightened by the church's increasingly anti-modernist stance.

The Dagestan tragedy occurred almost simultaneously with a meeting of the new presidential council for interethnic relations, a blatantly ineffectual and ceremonial body that issues lofty statements about key problems even as the government cuts funding to the few programs intended to address them. And in true Soviet style, the council is not composed of specialists on interethnic relations but of leaders of the largest ethnic minorities and various officials.

Thus, as interethnic and inter-religious relations rapidly deteriorate, the authorities lack programs to cope with them, mechanisms to create new programs, and the realization that both are urgently needed. This leaves the police powerless. What's more, the reactionary measures being proposed on the regional level are likely to fan the flames.

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