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Russia Getting Eaten Alive by Black Widows

By Andrew Foxall

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Monday's suicide bomb attack in Volgograd was not the first such attack in Russia, and it will not be the last. Since 2000, suicide bombings have become increasingly frequent in Russia, and "black widow" suicide bombers have been integral to this.

No one has yet claimed responsibility for the attack, which killed at least six people and injured at least 33 others. Reports in Russia, however, suggest that the bomber was Naida Asiyalova, a 30-year-old woman from Dagestan — an insurgency-ravaged and predominantly Islamic republic in Russia's troublesome North Caucasus region — who had recently converted to Islam and who was married to a known Islamic militant. If this is the case, it would represent the latest in a long line of terrorist attacks by black widows from the North Caucasus. From 2000 to 2004, all but five of the 25 Chechen-linked separate suicide bombings in Russia included women.

Initially, these attacks targeted those whom Chechen separatists considered to be combatants

in the North Caucasus — primarily government and military assets. But they have since spread into central Russia and have followed one of two templates. Either the suicide bomber drives a Russian military vehicle, filled with explosives, into or next to the target just prior to detonation, or the individual enters a public transport system and detonates a suicide belt. Unlike suicide bombers elsewhere, black widows are motivated by a desire to avenge the deaths of male relatives mistreated or killed by the Russian state rather than by religious fundamentalism.

For those who thought Islamic terrorism in the North Caucasus ended when President Vladimir Putin declared an end to Russia's "counter-terrorist operations" in Chechnya in April 2009, the attack in Volgograd is evidence that they were wrong. Such terrorism never went away. In 2012 alone, there were 96 recorded terrorist attacks in southern Russia, of which seven were suicide bombings.

As Russia prepares to host the Olympic Games in Sochi, located dangerously close to the North Caucasus region, this thought should keep the Kremlin awake at night.

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