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Who Profits From Terrorism?

By Nikolai Petrov

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The end of the year was marred by a series of high-profile terrorist attacks both within the North Caucasus and close to its borders. First, a car packed with explosives blew up in Pyatigorsk. That was followed by two major explosions in Volgograd. Then, earlier this month in Stavropol, the authorities discovered four automobiles at the Kabardino-Balkaria border containing both corpses and car bombs.

Had the explosions in the Volgograd train station and trolleybus that claimed 34 lives never happened, the much smaller attacks in Stavropol might not have gained so much attention.

After all, Russians long ago became accustomed to numerous, small-scale terrorist attacks there. Last year alone, 700 North Caucasus citizens died in armed violence and 525 were injured.

But the terrorist attacks in Volgograd were different in their brutality and the high number of victims. The scale of those bombings, their thorough preparation and the carefully chosen timing of the blasts to achieve the maximum psychological effect point to the work not of scattered individuals or small groups, but of the radical Islamist Caucasus Emirate organization headed by Doku Umarov who last July declared the end of the moratorium on attacking civilians and his intention to disrupt the Olympic Games in Sochi.

In fact, local criminals might have been enlisted to actually carry out those attacks. Over the past two decades, terrorism has become something of a business in the region. But even the most skilled local thugs could hardly have orchestrated the attacks themselves.

The fact that both bombings just before the New Year took place only a short time after the first blast on public transportation might be interpreted as an especially daring stunt by the organizers, one intended to demonstrate that law enforcement and intelligence agencies are unable to adequately protect Russian citizens.

The way commentators have reacted to the terrorist attacks reveals something about the public's state of mind. Among those suspected of organizing the attack, analysts named not only local militants, but also the political elite who are disgruntled over the sharp reduction in funding from the federal budget, with the name of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov topping the list. They also mentioned several siloviki groups, which face tighter budgets after a generously funded federal program to provide passenger safety on public transportation — initiated after the Domodedovo Airport bombing — ended in 2013.

The truth of this or any theory based on the answer to the question, "Who profits from terrorism?" is not important. More important is the fact that such ideas are put forward at all and discussed seriously in public. It indicates serious divisions in society and peoples' deep mistrust of the political elite and law enforcement bodies.

If the theory is true that the Volgograd bombings were perpetrated by forces more interested in maintaining or restoring the status quo than in destabilizing society, then perhaps such blasts will not occur in Sochi or during the Olympic Games. At the same time, however, after the Olympics when Russia is out of the global spotlight, the huge flow of federal funding to the region will dry up. Freed from any pressing public relations concerns, Moscow will likely use a firm hand to restore order in the North Caucasus, as it is already doing in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria.

At that point, we might witness new, more deadly terrorist attacks in protest against those changes.

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