

FSB Confused Over Terrorism

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Three weeks have passed since terrorists killed dozens by detonating two successive bombs in Volgograd, and the authorities have yet to resolve what is proving to be a very difficult case. Of course, two or three weeks are practically nothing when investigating such crimes. Experience shows that in the absence of an obvious "smoking gun," it could take many months, if not several years to solve. But the lack of certainty about those tragic events raises serious concerns about security at the Winter Olympics in Sochi, now several weeks away.

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Every law enforcement officer in the region will remain on full alert both before and during the Games. Sochi already resembles a city under siege. It is closed to all vehicles from outside the area. All incoming parcels are closely screened. A host of security forces run multiple checks on every person entering the city. Nobody can just stroll into Sochi anymore.

But it would be wrong to blame the FSB for this. It is responding to a serious terrorist threat that could conceivably ruin the Olympics. The North Caucasus is the prime breeding ground for terrorists in the country. Russia's struggle with terrorism is much like the decades-long war between the Israeli government and Arab terrorists.

The authorities have provided scant information on how the investigations into the Volgograd terrorist attacks are going. The news we do hear creates a mixed impression: Either FSB officials are not telling the truth in a bid to confuse the terrorists, or the FSB itself is confused.

Following the first terrorist attack on a bus in Volgograd in October, investigators confidently announced that a certain Naida Asiyalova was responsible and were quick to post a picture of her passport she was supposedly carrying during the attack that showed absolutely no sign of damage from the blast. That move met with ridicule. Then, the authorities posted a new photo showing her tattered passport following the explosion. However, the authorities offered no explanation as to how Asiyalova used her passport, as required by law, to purchase an inter-city bus ticket and travel from Makhachkala to Volgograd.

In late November, intelligence agencies carried out an operation in Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan, that they claim killed members of a Makhachkala-based militant group, and that these had been the men responsible for preparing Asiyalova's suicide bombing in Volgograd. In late November, agents also killed Asiyalova's husband — Dmitry Sokolov, aka the "Russian Wahhabi." Intelligence agencies reported that after they surrounded his house and began negotiating with him, Sokolov admitted that he had organized the terrorist attack in Volgograd.

Following the twin attacks on the Volgograd train station and trolleybus, the authorities initially claimed the culprits were female suicide bombers and again posted a photo of one of the suspects on the Internet. But now they claim that the bombers were men and suggested that another "Russian Wahhabi" surnamed Pechenkin was responsible.

The authorities only refer to "Russian" or "Slavic-looking" extremists in an attempt to diffuse ethnic tensions. Constantly emphasizing that terrorist suspects are Chechen or Dagestani only increases this divide. After all, Volgograd citizens came close to waging a pogrom against North Caucasus natives after the bombings in December. Although initially the authorities pointed their fingers at Pechenkin, the theory that he staged the bombing did not pan out.

Then, some lawmakers began proposing a blackout on information concerning terrorist attacks. They argue that terrorists cannot achieve their goal of terrorizing the public if nobody hears about their attacks. I think just the opposite should happen: Society must hold the FSB fully accountable for solving these crimes, and the agency should be responsible for its lapses.

In all likelihood, the authorities will try to solve the Volgograd bombings in their traditional manner: By killing militants during a raid somewhere in Dagestan and then announcing afterward that the dead men were the culprits. Of course, the operation will leave no survivors and no public trial will ensue that would allow the public to weigh the evidence against the terrorists.

In addition, the State Duma will not hold an investigation into the work of the FSB that would allow lawmakers — or opposition leaders — to grill intelligence officials over their negligence, demand answers on how such crimes were committed in the first place and what the agency is doing to prevent future attacks.

In the absence an investigation, the public will continue to doubt that the FSB can protect them from such attacks because the inherently flawed system that allows law enforcement agencies to remain unaccountable to voters and parliament will remain unchanged. And that means more terrorist attacks are possible. Let's hope and pray that they will not happen during the Olympics.

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