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Russia Has Forgotten Beslan

By Ivan Sukhov

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With the ongoing flood of news out of Ukraine, Russia has almost completely forgotten about the North Caucasus. The 10-year commemoration of the Beslan hostage crisis might serve as a sad reminder.

Ten years ago, on Sept. 1, 2004, during the "first bell" celebration marking the beginning of the school year, a gang of armed militants burst into the schoolyard of School No. 1 in Beslan, North Ossetia.

They herded more than 1,000 people — including the elderly and children of all ages — into the school building and announced that they would hold them hostage until Russia withdraws its troops from Chechnya.

Two days later, on Sept. 3, Russian Special Forces stormed the building. In the ensuing battle, some of the militants' homemade bombs exploded, a blaze broke out and government troops unleashed gunfire toward the building.

The result: 334 people died and more than 800 were wounded, at least two of whom were later

added to the list of fatalities.

In the initial weeks after the tragedy, many wondered how a detachment of militants — who, according to official propaganda, should have been holed up in the Chechen mountains waiting to be crushed by Russian troops — sauntered into a neighboring region, seized a school in broad daylight and for two days held more than 1,000 hostages, a fourth of whom died during the subsequent rescue operation.

The federal authorities gave a paradoxical response. No senior siloviki or public officials at the federal or local levels lost their jobs, but the Russian people lost their right to directly elect governors.

Apparently, the Kremlin felt that elections were at least as dangerous as terrorists. Ten years after Beslan, the authorities reinstated the right to elect governors, though not quite to the extent it existed prior to the fall of 2004.

In every other way and in every other place except the city itself, Beslan has been forgotten. Of course, officials will pay a courtesy call to the school this year.

And as he has done each previous year, North Ossetian head Taimuraz Mamsurov, who has two children who spent three terrifying days among the Beslan school hostages, will escort federal officials to the memorial cemetery and the schoolyard monument where they will lay wreaths of mourning.

Only God knows what thoughts will run through their heads during those minutes of silence, but as for the rest of the country, it has forgotten Beslan.

It is forgotten not just because the country's attention is focused on Ukraine and the current confrontation with the West, but because Beslan — despite the millions of heartfelt tears shed throughout the country on Sept. 3, 2004 — sadly remains a distant and unfamiliar land for most Russians.

They know only that two obscure ethnic groups live there, and that the representatives of one group rose up and killed the representatives of the other.

Today, few people even remember this fact, but just a year ago, analysts following the barometer of Russian public opinion expressed concern, not over the surge in aggression toward Ukraine or the unprecedented hatred toward Europe and the U.S., but because 40 percent of the people now want this country to be more ethnically Russian than multiethnic.

More than 50 percent of respondents did not rule out the possibility of ethnic conflicts erupting in their cities, and about a third said such clashes had already occurred. What's more, they said deportation is an admissible way to prevent more fighting in the future.

In the politically incorrect ranking of ethnic groups that most irritate Russians, the people of the North Caucasus were the clear leader — despite the fact that respondents had difficulty identifying exactly which ethnic group resides there, and that all North Caucasus natives carry exactly the same Russian passport as those who consider them to be outsiders.

These figures reflect a serious social conflict.

In contrast to the 1990s, the people of the North Caucasus no longer hope to secede from Russia, but they are tired of the impotence of the Russian state. The federal budget remains the only engine driving the region's depressed local economies: Russia is still almost the only place where residents can find a place to work and study.

In addition, Russia remains the main portal to the outside world. Even if a person from Makhachkala wants to join the jihad fighters in Syria or Iraq, he would probably have to fly out from a Moscow airport while carrying a Russian passport. And that is to say nothing of the countless more mundane situations that arise every day.

At the same time, North Caucasus residents are also tired of the fact that most federal funds end up in the pockets of local officials, that they must use bribes to accomplish practically anything at all — from securing a bed in a maternity ward for a pregnant wife to receiving a death certificate after a parent has passed away — and that even such basic state institutions as the courts and police have ceased to carry out their intended purpose, serving, at best, as weapons of influence in commercial conflicts.

For its part, Russia has also grown very tired of the North Caucasus. After two wars in Chechnya and the mass exodus of most of the Russian population from the eastern part of that region, the people of this country no longer look at the North Caucasus or its residents as their compatriots.

That alienation is only increasing, and few Russians realize that the throngs of youths from the North Caucasus who loiter on the streets of big cities like Moscow or St. Petersburg — and who are so quick to violate not only the rules of conduct, but also the law — are the result of the collapse of those very same state institutions that are ultimately the responsibility of the whole country, the whole of Russian society.

Just before the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in late 2013, irritation over migrants from the North Caucasus became a permanent fixture in the Russian political landscape.

Literally every week, Russian officials have had to urgently seek tactical solutions to ensure that the latest street fight between ethnic Russians and immigrants from the North Caucasus does not escalate into a riot, and that calls to exclude the North Caucasus from the Russian Federation are sounded less frequently.

One of the effects of the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine is a drop in the level of conflict between ethnic Russians and people from the Caucasus. Of course, that does not mean that the systemic problems driving a wedge between the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia have moved any closer to a solution.

It is just that the focus of public attention — itself largely determined by state-controlled television — has shifted toward Ukraine. The Caucasus, with all of its difficult issues, has been bumped to the sidelines.

But the destructive processes there have not stopped, and the resulting problems will once again come to the fore once the situation in Ukraine is eventually resolved.

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