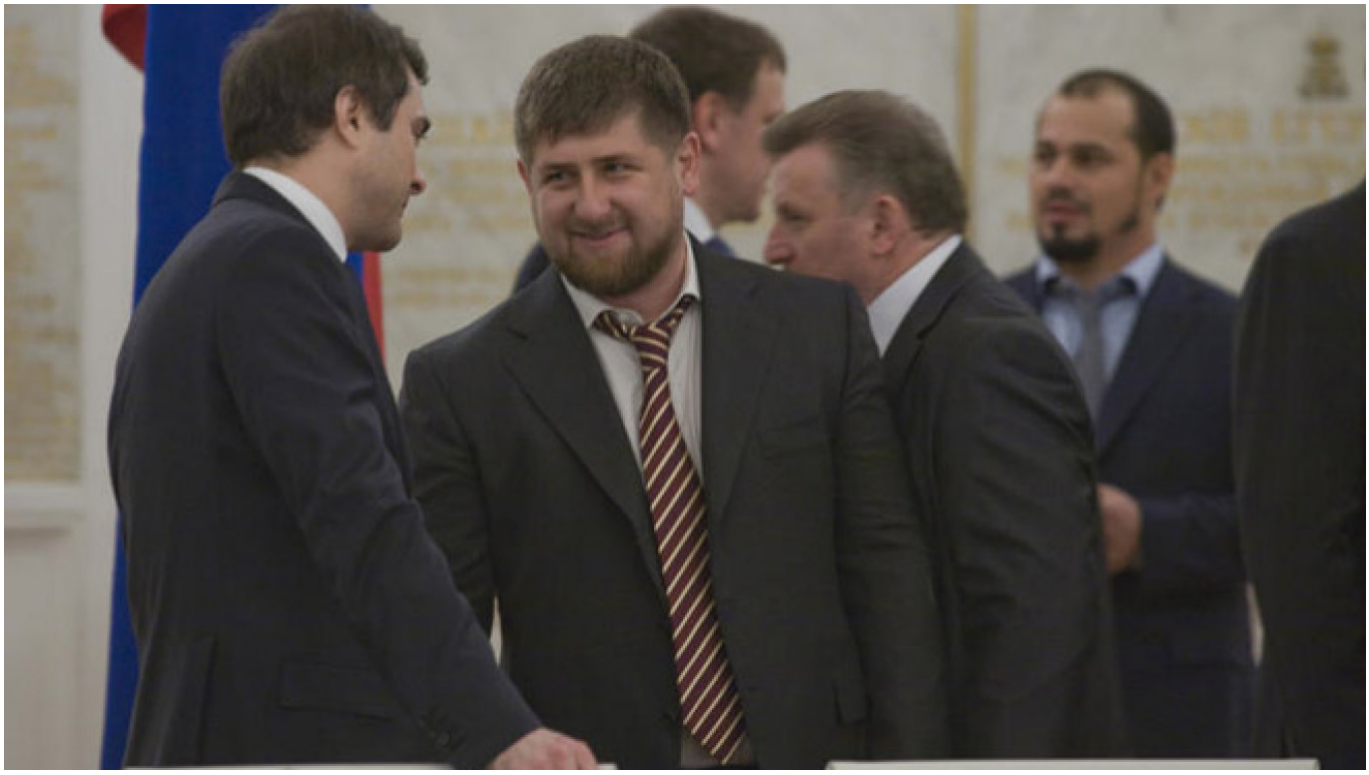
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Caucasus Terror Hype Benefits Kadyrov, FSB

By Mark Galeotti

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How great is the real threat of terrorism from the North Caucasus — especially as it is now at least in theory connected to the Islamic State — and how far does the tone of such discussion matter? Of course, the region is beset by a continuing and deadly insurgency, one that from time to time inevitably will reach out to launch terrorist attacks elsewhere in Russia.

However, as the whole damp squib over the "threat" to the Sochi Winter Olympics demonstrated, we should not take every claim at face value, not least because the greatest beneficiaries of the hype are Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov and the Russian security agencies.

Despite the threats made to disrupt the Sochi Games, there were not any serious attempts.

This is, of course, an important issue to address. Blake Holley's recent op-ed in The Moscow Times, ''North Caucasus Is Russia's Ticking Time Bomb'' (Jan. 18), was a rejoinder to my earlier article "Islamic State Poses No Threat to Russia, Yet" (Jan. 13). I would suggest that in many ways we are actually closer in our views than he suggests.

He concludes, for example, that "The return of any number of the militants currently fighting in Iraq and Syria, is why the Islamic State is currently a ticking time bomb waiting to explode in the North Caucasus" while I write, "There may well be a price to be paid when and if militants return home with the experience — and perhaps allies — they gained in Iraq and Syria."

However, there is a fundamental question here of wider importance: How serious a wider threat is the North Caucasus insurgency? Of course, it is a thoroughly miserable blight on the region, empowering thuggish local authorities, undermining what limited attempts there are to address the region's economic problems and intimidating those brave souls who want to chart a middle way between jihadist terrorists and Moscow's local representatives.

On average there were two attacks on officials and police in Dagestan alone every week last year, and many other republics are scarcely much better off.

We need also to keep this in context. Chechnya — courtesy of vicious and abusive counter-insurgency tactics, as well as exhaustion after two decades of on-and-off resistance — is largely pacified.

The Grozny attack on the eve of President Vladimir Putin's state of the nation address in December was showy and demonstrated that the rebels could still launch attacks, but did nothing to shake Kadyrov's grip on power.

The scale and tempo of attacks outside the region decreased markedly in 2014. Despite the blood-curdling threats made to disrupt the Sochi Games, there were not even any serious attempts. In part this is because the Russian authorities launched pre-emptive operations across the region, but it also reflects the basic organizational weakness of many of the jamaats, or fighting groups, and their limited capacity to plan and mount complex attacks outside their home areas.

Meanwhile, there is no evidence of any meaningful connection with jihadists outside the region beyond some limited fundraising still taking place through Turkey and the outflow of young fighters heading to Syria and Iraq. The jamaats raise the limited funds they need through local theft, kidnap, "taxation" — extortion — and some small-scale drug dealing.

Even so, their operations do not really require much in the way of funds, and nothing suggests a correlation between resources and operational tempo.

But all the same, tempting cliches about "ticking time bombs" and a willingness to default to the most worrying potential scenarios does perform an important political function.

Unless and until there is clear evidence that he is unable to keep control of Chechnya — and any security professional knows that it is impossible to prevent every attack, so the Grozny incident hardly counts — Ramzan Kadyrov undoubtedly benefits.

His brutal and kleptocratic personal regime is regarded as the best option to keep Chechnya under control, and thus he perversely benefits from the right calibration of alarm: enough to persuade Moscow to continue to grant him his blank check and free rein, not enough to make him look an unreliable local agent.

Likewise, the security apparatus — and especially the Federal Security Service — benefits from the hype. The threats against Sochi became part of the narrative justifying not just the heavy security presence but also the unprecedented electronic surveillance measures, which essentially were trials of their subsequent use elsewhere in Russia, potentially against the political opposition.

Just as the Kremlin was eager to connect the Chechen rebels with al-Qaida back in the 2000s, to win Western acquiescence for their methods, so too the Russians are happy with anything that makes the North Caucasus insurgents look like part of what FSB chief Alexander Bortnikov called an Islamic State "terrorist international," however tenuous the connection may be.

It is certainly essential to avoid complacency and recognize not just that terrorism will continue to be a threat in both the North Caucasus and beyond for the foreseeable future.

However, we need to balance that with a degree of skepticism. Perversely, both the terrorists and those fighting them have a mutual interest in making the threat both greater and more global than the evidence suggests it really is.

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