

Black Wednesday: Chechnya comes to Moscow

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At the evening of October 23 a large group of people with guns captured over 700 hostages in the center of Moscow in a local culture hall, where a new Russian musical, «Nord-Ost», was on. According to information agencies quoting a website "Êàvkàz.îrg", that shortly disappeared from the web, informed that the operation had been undertaken by a group of suicide Chechen fighters led by a nephew of a killed Chechen field commander Arbi Barayev, Movsar Barayev.

According to the Russian General Department of the Interior, as many as 40 persons were involved in the hostage-taking operation. One of the leaders of the group who called himself Abu Sayid, announced they were 25 men and 25 women, that the building was wired and all of them were going to die. He added that they «seek death more than you [seek] life». The government reacted by pulling units of special security troops, units of the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of the Interior and the Security Service, FSB. A joint operation center was set up under the command of the FSB chairman Mykola Patrushev. President of Russia Vladimir Putin cancelled his visits to Germany and Portugal and started consultations with the «force ministers». It was announced that at least 75 of the hostages were not Russian citizens, therefore, a crisis unit was formed within the Russian Foreign Ministry. The crisis center was led by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Valery Loshchinin. The hostage crisis lasted for almost 72 hours. From the beginning of the crisis the terrorists freed about 50 hostages but kept the rest. A number of Russian culture personalities and Russian politicians proposed themselves as negotiators. Russian TV channels broadcast practically round the clock bringing the news about everything that was happening within the building. Naturally, some tensions could not be avoided. For instance, the Ministry for Publishing, TV and Radio Broadcasting and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation ordered to stop broadcasting of the Moskovia TV company, allegedly for «rude violations of the legislation on fighting terrorism in the mass media of Russia». The ministry also intended to close down the site of the Echo Moskvy Radio Station because it had published interviews with the terrorists. It was announced that the Ministry would take severe measures against the media that would «give the terrorists the possibility to speak up». On October 24 the NTV was virtually forced to suspend broadcasting of an exclusiv be interview with Movsar Barayev. The interview was broadcast only after everything was over.

Practically, the only demand made by the kamikadze Chechen fighters was termination of the war and withdrawal of the Russian federal troops from the territory of Chechnya. Yet, while the demand looks rather general, the specific goal seemed to be to attract international attention to the Chechen problems.

According to one of the hostages who could communicate with the outer world by mobile, the terrorists treated them well. The hostages' only plea was for the Russian special troops not to start the operation and agree to all the demands. 25 relatives of hostages held two anti-war rallies in Moscow. According to the media, the rallies went on «under the guns». On October 24 the Russian media broadcasting showed reallies of local population in Chechnya condemning the hostage-taking in Moscow. After the three-day term given by the terrorists for carrying out their demands, the terrorists began shooting the hostages. According to official information and evidence of the surviving hostages, 2 persons were killed. A number of hostages made an attempt to escape from the building, but failed.

At the night of October 26 the Russian special security troops started their operation designed to capture the terrorists and free the hostages. However, according to the BBC Russian Service, journalists who were keeping their eyes on the building did not hear any shooting and stressed that the fighters were prepared to wait an answer to their demands till 10 a.m. Probably, the troops began the operation as soon as the preparations had been completed. According to Deputy Minister of the Interior Vladimir Vasiliev, over 750 hostages were freed, but 67 of the hostages died. Vasiliev refuted earlier allegations that the hostages were killed by the use of the so-called «special methods» and announced that 34 terrorists were killed in the operation.

Among the hostages there were 75 citizens of other states. The largest group among them were Ukrainians. The

estimates of their number varied from 22 to 37 (according to Ukrainian diplomats). However, by the end of October 26, the list of released hostages contained names of only 22 Ukrainians - probably because some of the hostages were still unconscious. According to Ukrainian ambassador to Russia Mykola Biloblotsky, the embassy had no information about the health condition of released Ukrainians, but as State Secretary of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry Yuri Sergeyev put it, the Ukrainian hostages had received only psychological traumas. Relatives of the hostages continue searching for their loved ones at hospitals, but access to any information about their condition is minimized. According to some Russian news agencies and TV channels, The Russian Committee for Health Care officially prohibited doctors of those hospitals to talk to the media.

Reaction in Ukraine

The actions of the Ukrainian government and its anxiety looked natural under the circumstances, though not always effective. In the tragic situation it's hard to judge how effective efforts of Ukrainian politicians and diplomats could be.

On October 24 Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Anatoly Zlenko announced that Ukraine's Ambassador to Russia Mykola Biloblotsky was at the crisis center formed to facilitate the release of the hostages. «There is no justification to the actions of the terrorists... We hope that this people's tragedy will be solved peacefully,» the official statement of the Ukrainian MFA said. President Leonid Kuchma condemned the actions of the terrorists and interrupted his official visit to Croatia. In a telephone conversation with his Russian counterpart he assured Vladimir Putin that Ukraine was prepared to provide any assistance in freeing the hostages

Theoretically, it was possible to free the Ukrainian hostages earlier, as Ukraine was not at war with Chechnya, and during the first Chechen war was probably the only country in the former CIS that accepted Chechen refugees. During this hostage crisis, according to eye-witnesses, the Ukrainian hostages were kept separately. According to some sources, Ukrainian officials were trying to negotiate the release of the Ukrainian hostages. On October 25 Oleh Bepalov MP flew to Moscow and shortly announced that the agreement had been reached to start direct negotiations about freeing the Ukrainian hostages. «As a result of the negotiations the terrorists may begin releasing Ukrainian citizens in groups of 2-3 persons,» he said and added that the terrorists had taken into account the fact that Ukraine was not at war with Chechnya.

However, the negotiations about freeing the Ukrainian hostages, as well as of other foreigners among the hostages did not succeed, notwithstanding the arrival of all Ambassadors of all countries (which was one of the conditions of the suicide terrorists). Later that day it was announced that the Russian authorities insisted on the release of all hostages without separating foreigners from the Russian citizens. That position was announced by official spokesman of the FSB Sergey Ignatchenko. At the evening of October 25, member of the Ukrainian parliament and leader of the UNA-UNSO Andry Shkil stated that the Russian FSB had halted an intermediary between the Chechens and Ukraine's official representatives in Moscow. Some of Ukrainian politicians described actions of the Russian authorities as rather controversial and hinted that the Kremlin leadership was interested primarily in receiving international approval of its actions to legitimize its policy in Chechnya.

Commenting on the developments in Moscow later that day Yuri Sergeyev announced that the terrorists did not want to keep contact either with the Russian authorities or with international organizations. The Ukrainian parliament reacted with the suggestion to delegate some of the MPs, primarily deputy leader of the Crimean Tatar Medjlis Refat Chubarov, as negotiators. Speaker of the Ukrainian parliament Volodymyr Lytvyn officially asked Sergeyev to support the MPs who were going to Moscow. Possibly, an internationally respected Moslem and a representative of the Crimean Tatar people that shared tragic history of deportation with Chechens, could be the right person for such negotiations. Other MPs who intended to go to Moscow were Andry Shkil of the UNA-UNSO and Taras Chornovil.

Later that day it became known that Ukraine's Ambassador in Moscow «expressed anxiety» about the fact that Shkil was one of the MPs who were planning to participate in the negotiations. His worries were linked to Russia's negative attitude to UNA-UNSO - a nationalist force whose volunteers were reported to have taken part in the conflict at the side of the Chechens. The way of the Ukrainian MPs to Moscow was interrupted, though, by the cancellation of a Ukrainian Airlines flight, reportedly due to weather conditions. The MPs could only catch a later flight.

On October 26, Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine Yevhen Marchuk flew to Moscow for coordination of actions with his Russian counterparts, following a decision of a coordination group led by Leonid Kuchma, and Kuchma's telephone conversation with Putin.

Given the situation and the fact that the terrorists were not willing to negotiate, it is hard to say how effective the Ukrainian officials' mission could be from the very beginning. However, even after the crisis was over, very little information has been released to public, except the statement that all of the Ukrainian hostages were alive. Possibly, the lack of information was caused by Russia's de facto information blockade of the issue, but in that case the attitude of the Ukrainian leadership cannot but stop unpleasantly surprising Ukrainians, as it in fact follows the order of the Russian authorities. It is difficult to comment on the attitude of Ukrainian Consul in Moscow Petro Matsarsky who, regardless of a previous agreement, refused to release information about the condition of the freed Ukrainians who were still in hospitals in Moscow, to the TSN news program of the 1+1 TV channel.

Causes and Follow-ups

The explosive cause of the recent hostage tragedy dates back to the beginning of the past decade, but the escalation occurred during the so-called second Chechen war. For several years the Russian authorities have failed to solve the Russian-Chechen puzzle through political methods. The notorious statement of Putin, whose popularity as the Prime Minister was growing rapidly also because he was seen by many Russians as a person able to stop the Chechen war, that he was ready to «mochit v sortire» Chechens was the background of the entire Russian policy towards Chechnya throughout the multi-level conflict. Moreover, the conflict was quite beneficial for a variety of political and economic groups - from the Russian military lobby to those who benefit from illegal oil processing or kidnapping.

The long war has its own «infrastructure» that consists not only of political and economic relations, but also of a number of unsolved social and humanitarian problems. In the stuffed with weapons Chechnya a new generation of Chechens has grown up in the state of war. For that generation, war with the federal troops is a normal pass-time, the means and meaning of life. Among the lack of serious efforts on the part of the Russian authorities to find a peaceful solution to the conflict and the information blockade of the issue by Russia, the situation threatens to deteriorate. The terrorist attack was used as an «information occasion». Unfortunately, it is not difficult to predict that the young generation that has no positive experience of communication with «other» Russians, other non-Chechens, the generation that sees Russians as enemies only, may change the dynamics of this conflict and transform it following the example of Israel - suicide terrorists, multiple terrorist attacks etc. The «front line» is likely to move from the territory of the Northern Caucasus (as it happened during earlier terrorist attacks in Kizlyar (1996) and Budionovsk (1995) to major Russian cities - with all multiple consequences for the Russian citizens. Some experts believe that in the recent conflict President Putin has chosen the right approach and did not contact the hostages personally - otherwise that could serve as a temptation for future terrorists to act in other cities of Russia to achieve the sought-after information result. However, the regained control over the recent crisis does not solve the problem of Chechnya. Here one may fully agree with a Russian-based Ukrainian journalist, Vitaly Portnikov: «after the Chechen factor became simply a part of settling the internal Russian political and economic scores, after the elite began to regard the deployment of forces exclusively as an accompaniment of an election campaign that is designed to facilitate a smooth transfer of power, the Chechen issue was totally pushed to the deadlock» (Zerkalo Nedeli, October 18, 2002). The deadlock of the Chechen issue became even worse after the September 11 attacks, the start of the global war on terrorism and Russia's involvement in the anti-terrorist coalition. The Russian president received a carte blanche to pursue his politics on Chechnya. The international community agreed to legitimizing the interpretation of Chechen's fighting for independence as a manifestation of the global terrorism.

Obviously, while condemning the terrorist methods, the roots of the recent events should be sought not only (and not as much) in alleged relations between Chechen field commanders with the Al Qaida and Bin Laden, but in the Russian politics in the Caucasus that has led to «escalation of violence, constant generation of new and new guerillas, fighters and bandits and, finally, terrorists,» as Russian politician Boris Nemtsov put it in his interview to the Echo Moskvy Radio on October 26. «When the gangs of Khattab and Basayev came to Dagestan, it was necessary to save the country... we supported then Putin's actions and did the right thing' he said, «but when the war moved to cities and towns, it was necessary to start the political process». That was not done - and the results have been seen shortly.

By the way, some earlier comments on the Moscow hostage tragedy referred to the problems of the Georgian Pankisi valley, as some of Russian officials argued that the terrorists came from the Pankisi valley, and alleged that Georgians were the first of the hostages to be released. The statements had nothing to do with the facts and the theme was quietly dropped later.

Another negative outcome of the situation was the growing anti-Chechen sentiment among Russians, the phobia of «persons of Caucasian nationality» and, in addition to routine tension and prejudice, the growth of the ranks of Russian skinheads.

The Russian authorities linked the hostage-taking with the September 11 terrorist attacks and suggested that the recent terrorist attack had been planned and coordinated outside Russia. Vladimir Putin explicitly stated that the plan and performers of the action «were formulated abroad», as the first information from representatives of the terrorists had come from abroad. There are other contexts that today, due to the terrorist act will make it more difficult to find a solution to the Chechnya problem. For instance, some of the Russian media showed a video tape portraying Aslan Maskhadov as the coordinator of the attack. Thus, the Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov was «transformed» into a terrorist Maskhadov, a person with whom no negotiations can be held. Thus, there is a growing possibility that the options of using more force will be used by the Russian government. That kind of approach seems to bring more risks than solutions.