

New Wave of Islamic Extremism Adds to Putin's Troubles

The series of terrorist attacks in France, in late October, attracted much attention in Russia, sharply dividing public opinion and leaving President Vladimir Putin in an awkward limbo. The Kremlin leader excels at positioning himself as a counter-terrorist champion when the issue is clear and solvable by military means—such as when it came to obliterating the so-called Islamic State. In the current crisis, however, his readiness to explicitly condemn, for instance, the deadly October 29 knife attack in Nice, as he did in an official telegram to French President Emmanuel Macron, is mixed with implicit readiness to trample over freedom of speech in the quest to defeat such terrorism (Kremlin.ru, October 29). The Kremlin insists that offending the feelings of believers was unacceptable and unlawful, so in Russia such crimes were unthinkable (Izvestia, October 30). They are, nevertheless, happening: last week (October 30), a teenager threw a Molotov cocktail into a police station in Tatarstan and was shot dead while assaulting officers with a knife (Meduza, October 30).

The Russian authorities are confused about how to respond to spontaneous public actions. A protest of Islamic activists in front of the French embassy in Moscow, on Thursday (October 29) was allowed, but another one, on Friday, was forcefully dispersed (Kommersant, October 30). The fiercest excoriation of the hard stance taken by Macron in the wake of the wave of Islamist-motivated violence came from Ramzan Kadyrov, who finds it necessary to justify his brutal rule over Chechnya with staunch defenses of Islamic values (Republic.ru, October 28). The Kremlin implored the country's regional leaders not to interfere in foreign policymaking, which is the prerogative of the president (RBC, October 28). But Kadyrov dared to reject this reprimand and demanded an apology from maverick Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who found it convenient to elaborate on the disapproval expressed by the Kremlin (Moscow Echo, October 30). Despite Kadyrov's embrace of the Islamic cause, the resistance against his dictatorial rule continues, and in a recent "special operation" in Grozny, three police officers were killed while storming a hideout of suspected terrorists (Kavkazsky Uzel, October 13; see EDM, October 26).

What complicates Putin's position yet further is the forceful and emotionally

charged attack on Macron's defense of democratic values by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who seeks to claim the leadership role for the cause of political Islam (RussianCouncil.ru, October 25). Disagreements between Moscow and Ankara over the Syrian and Libyan conflicts remain barely manageable, and Putin still cannot find a convincing response to Turkey's massive support for Azerbaijan in the latter's already-five-week-long war with Armenia over Karabakh (The Insider, October 23). In a recent phone conversation with Putin, Erdoğan announced that he had drawn a "red line" for Russia in the Caucasus, thus undercutting Moscow's support for Yerevan and rendering the ongoing Russian diplomatic maneuvers ineffectual (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, October 28). Russia tried to counter by delivering an airstrike against a pro-Turkish militia camp in Syria's Idlib province, but Erdoğan raised the stakes further by threatening a new offensive in Syria (Kommersant, October 29). Putin could have chosen to try to condemn Turkey's alleged backing of terrorists and extremists of various sorts, from al-Qaeda offshoots to the Muslim Brotherhood; but he is reluctant to confront his increasingly difficult "strategic partner" (Carnegie.ru, October 30).

Russian nationalists who used to rally around Putin's flag planted in annexed Crimea are now upset with his failure to cut Erdoğan down to size. However, their anti-Islamic fervor threatens to destabilize the Kremlin leader's broader regime-entrenching course (Svobodnaya Pressa, October 30). A major challenge to this course keeps growing in Belarus, where embattled President Alyaksandr Lukashenka is now promising to treat the peaceful mass protests as a "terrorist threat" (Newsru.com, October 27). Putin may not be quite ready to subscribe to this definition and may disapprove of Lukashenka's pledge to "take no prisoners"; but the Russian president has committed to supporting the fellow-autocrat who has relied on brutal violence to prolong his reign (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, October 28). Police power, among other methods, already gained Belarus's leader nearly three months of extra time since the falsified elections in early August. But the unexpected resilience of Belarusian society in rejecting Lukashenka and withstanding his regime's violent attacks signify the inevitable near end of this rule by repression (Rosbalt, October 30).

Lukashenka may act as a cornered despot, but Putin is more aware of the grim legacy of state terror in Russia, where October 30 is annually marked to remember the victims of political repressions (Rossiiskaya Gazeta, October 30). The traditional action of reading randomly selected names of people who were

executed or perished in Joseph Stalin's GULAG was organized virtually this year, but it reached millions of Russians via online social networks, which remain uncensored despite many efforts to establish state control (October29.ru, October 29). Tragic family stories thus gain traction with the new generations who have grown up knowing only Putin as the irreplaceable leader and are now experiencing the maturing of his corrupt autocracy (Znak.com, October 30). Putin yearns to ensure the stability of his illiberal regime by branding opposition activists as "extremists," expecting that selective punishments will suffice to dishearten mass support for these "radicals." But as some observers note, the ugly shadow of Stalinism grows deeper under his power vertical (Riddle, October 27).

The radicalization of Islamist-indoctrinated youth is a much lesser concern for Putin than the deepening disappointment in his self-serving rule among the increasingly propaganda-resistant populace. He may even find glee in Macron's troubles and seek to benefit from France's problems with the Muslim world. Yet his own inability to restrain the arrogant Kadyrov or to confront the ambitious Erdoğan may undercut his residual support even deeper than his courtiers dare to assess. The multiple escalating tensions caused by the unrelenting COVID-19 pandemic is certainly apparent in many societies; but in Russia, it is aggravated by the crisis of a long-underfunded health care system and the failure in leadership caused by the protracted self-isolation of the presumably omnipotent guarantor of stability. Belarus is a striking example of the determination in society to stay the course of peaceful resistance to a regime's attempts to terrorize it into submission. In Russia, however, the accumulated discontent is so combustible that even an utterly senseless, random terrorist attack could become a trigger for a sequence of violent explosions of anger—a recurrent feature of Russia's tragic history.

Source:

<https://jamestown.org/program/new-wave-of-islamic-extremism-adds-to-putins-troubles/>

[Disclaimer]