

# *THE TERROR ATTACK AT BESLAN:*

# 'Nord-Ost' revisited?

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In autumn 2002 Chechen terrorists carried out a voluminous hostage taking in Moscow. This attack, which was considered to be Russia's '9/11', had - at first sight - deep consequences for the internal security thinking in the Russian Federation (RF). After the violent ending of the hostage taking Putin gave orders to intensify the war in Chechnya, to reform military power and to make changes in current national security documents and legislation, in order to strengthen Russia's fight against terrorism. In September 2004 Russia was shocked by another large-scale hostage taking, this time in the North-Ossetian city of Beslan. This article will provide a preliminary assessment of the policy changes of 2002, as viewed from the aftermath of the Beslan hostage taking.



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In October 2002 Chechen fighters carried out a hostage taking in a theatre in Moscow, in which the musical 'Nord-Ost' was performed<sup>2)</sup>. Special forces (spetsnaz) units of the power ministries violently made an end to this act of terror. 'Nord-Ost' had brought the Chechen conflict into Russia's capital. As a result of this hostage taking there was a broad feeling amongst Russian military-political decision makers as

well as in Russian society that this terrorist attack meant a turning point in RF security policy, which was illustrated by the Russian press by describing 'Nord-Ost' as Russia's '9/11'.<sup>3)</sup> On 29 October 2002, President Putin affirmed this defining moment by ordering his security ministers and chiefs to draft a revision of the NSC. The case of 'Nord-Ost' hit a number of elements of RF security policy. Three aspects in particular came to the fore: its influence on the Chechen conflict, on military reforms and on the legal foundation of security policy.

### **Intensification of the Chechen conflict**

'Nord-Ost' forced Putin to prove that his firm commitment on breaking Chechen resistance and thus ending the conflict would now be put into practise. His reputation was at stake. Putin must have been well aware of the fact that for prolongation of his strong support in society, he simply could not afford to lose this battle.

In the first Chechen conflict the Chechen resistance had demonstrated that hostage takings were an excellent tactical weapon with political-strategic consequences. The total failure of RF Armed Forces and Other Troops to cope with the hostage takings in Budënnovsk in June 1995, in which some 200 citizens and soldiers were killed, and in Pervomayskoye in January 1996, in which tens of spetsnaz-officers as well as 90 citizens died, had been an important factor in the decision making process which resulted in the withdrawal of Russian forces and troops from Chechnya at the end of 1996. The reputation of the military as well as that of President Yeltsin had suffered deeply from this defeat. Putin was deter-

mined to prevent a recurrence of this failure and probably for this reason granted the anti-terror units a large freedom of movement in solving the hostage taking of 'Nord-Ost'. This time the hostage taking was brought to an end in favour of RF authorities. The fact that the solution of 'Nord-Ost' did cause a great number of casualties among the hostages was probably subjected to the interests of the political and military leadership, who were resolute in having the best end of the staff this time. In order to deal with the Chechens once and for all, straight away after the end of the hostage taking Defense minister Sergey Ivanov intensified military action in Chechnya, fully supported by public opinion<sup>4)</sup>. Taking into account the fact that spetnaz-units conducted around 90% of the operations of the Internal Troops, Putin decided to give them a high priority in finishing the Chechen conflict<sup>5)</sup>.

'Nord-Ost' turned out to be a victory for Putin. It

strengthened his conviction that the 'Chechen problem' could be solved by military means. His position and reputation, as well as that of the military leadership were secured. However, this triumph was a short-term one. In the long run intensifying military action in Chechnya as a result of 'Nord-Ost' would not lead to a peaceful settlement of the conflict. Not only critics from the West but Russian scientists also deplored that Putin did not pay any attention to the dreadful social-economic circumstances in Chechnya, which were a major cause for Chechen separatism<sup>6)</sup>. A political resolution, making an end to the bloodshed of Chechen citizens as well as of Russian soldiers, remained at a far distance.

### **Military reforms led by opportunism**

For Putin 'Nord-Ost' was a test-case in another aspect too: his response to this terror attack would prove to what extent he controlled the security apparatus. Power struggle among security organs (Ministry of Defence [MoD] and power ministries) has been a constant factor in Russian security policy of the last decade, which had consequences for military build-up and reforms. In the hostage taking of 'Nord-Ost', apart from backup support by the military intelligence service GRU of the MoD, it were special forces of the power ministries, the Ministry of Internal Affairs MVD (SOBR unit) and the Federal Security Service FSB (Alfa and Vypel units), which took the lead and carried out the operation against the hostage takers<sup>7)</sup>. In the recent past the MVD was 'punished', by lowering its budget and personnel strength, for its failures in the first Chechen conflict. Now, for killing the terrorists (and more than 100 hostages as well) the MVD, as well as the FSB, not only received a raise in budget, but by the intention of reforming MVD's Internal Troops into a Presidential National Guard and strengthening FSB's command over the operation in Chechnya the status of both power ministries was lifted at the expense of other security organs, such as the MoD<sup>8)</sup>. Hence in the aftermath of 'Nord-Ost' Putin decided to form a National Guard, consisting exclusively of professional soldiers and directly subordinated to the RF President. The commander of the Internal Troops was convinced of the fact that this proposed structure for his troops, closely related to the President, would be

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beneficial for the allocation of means into their hands<sup>9)</sup>. In addition to this, Putin decided to unite the different spetnaz-units of the MVD into a rapid reaction force, directed at improving the fight against guerrilla warfare in Chechnya, as well as against terrorist attacks elsewhere in Russia<sup>10)</sup>. Even Sergey Ivanov, although most likely reluctantly, had to acknowledge that not his department but the FSB was in the forefront of the fight against terrorism, supported by MoD forces<sup>11)</sup>.

In January 2003 the Academy of Military Sciences of the RF General Staff held its annual conference<sup>12)</sup>. The tone of this conference, at which speeches were not only delivered by military



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scientists but also by the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) and the Minister of Defence, revealed that Russia's security establishment had not freed itself from conservative views. The lectures of army-general Makhmut Gareyev, President of the Academy of Military Sciences, and other representatives of this institute, evidently expressed a continuation of anti-Western tendencies. For example, NATO allegedly was using the fight against terrorism to weaken Russia's military power. Furthermore, MoD Minister Sergey Ivanov stated that maintenance of a nuclear potential of deterrence was the highest priority of military policy. And CGS Kvashnin pointed at the threat of a large-scale conflict and emphasized the importance of Russia's position as a key player in the international arena. Only rarely at this conference attention was paid to Putin's order to set fighting terrorism as the primary task of forces and troops. Consequently, there was a difference in opinion between the MoD and the other ministries with armed formations and the President on the primacy of internal over external threats.

The abovementioned policy developments expressed a constant factor of RF security policy in the 1990s: a competition among security organs encouraged by a Presidential military reform policy which rewarded security organs for successful operations while cutting budgets of departments whose troops had failed. This constant factor demonstrated two negative consequences. The aforementioned statement by the commander of the Internal Troops gave evidence to the fact that this opportunistic approach damaged the joint use of military force and was thus in contrast with a unified and harmonious military policy. Secondly, this structural feature of security policy demonstrated short-term thinking, which had a negative effect on a well-thought plan of military reforms. It seemed that Putin, just like the chiefs of the security organs, showed a tendency of supporting 'conjuncture' policy in the field of military reforms, which went against a solid build-up of the security apparatus.

### **Revision of the legal foundation of security policy**

Shortly after 'Nord-Ost' parliamentarians, such as Aleksey Arbatov and Andrey Nikolayev, as well as academic security specialists declared in public that this hostage taking had demonstrated that the current legal system lacked a normative basis for an effective fight against acts of terror<sup>13</sup>). The existing legal system did not live up to the demands of the necessary anti-terrorist operations: for the structure of these operations provisions concerning a joint approach (MoD forces together with troops of the power ministries) were missing, and for the actual conduct of operations legal grounds for the use of spetsnaz-units were in need. For that reason current legislation, such as the Constitution, the NSC, the Military Doctrine, Laws on Anti-Terrorism, Defence as well as on State of Emergency, was to be revised. In addition to this, new legislation was to be passed on the joint use of forces, troops and security organs in internal conflicts, on the deployment of RF Armed Forces, an Anti-Terror Concept and a Law on fighting terrorism. The plea for adaptation of current legislation and the introduction of dedicated additional legislation, concerning operations against terrorism, not only touched upon laws and security documents, but included operational directives of forces and troops, which to a large extent were still directed at large-scale warfare<sup>14</sup>). Apart from legislation, another essential aspect of an effective fight against terrorism came to the fore: command and control of anti-terror operations. Politicians and scientists demanded to put one security organ in command of anti-terror policy, which as principal and coordinating security institution would lead all security organs involved. Arbatov, Nikolayev and other security experts also pleaded to make one person responsible of anti-terror operations<sup>15</sup>).

As mentioned before, on 29 October 2002 President Putin instructed his security ministers and chiefs to draft a revision of the NSC. According to MoD Minister Ivanov the adjustments of current legislation would include the following provisions: intensifying the involvement of the RF Armed Forces in fighting terrorism, assessing the increased threats against national security and the readiness of the RF to act against terrorists but also against their sponsors abroad. After revising the NSC, the Military Doctrine was to be altered, followed by other security documents subordinated to the NSC<sup>16</sup>).

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### **Evaluation of the policy decisions after 'Nord-Ost'**

The anticipated revision of security policy was ambivalent. On the one hand, recognizing the grown importance of internal



Foto's Internet:  
Russian army in Chechnya,  
end of 1999 - mid 2000.

threats and conflicts seemed to be a realistic approach of Putin. This instead of the focus on large-scale warfare, which conservative circles in the General Staff, by emphasizing nuclear instead of conventional forces, still considered to be the primary conflict. If the repeated conflicts in Chechnya and Dagestan did not make this clear, then surely 'Nord-Ost' proved that the primary threats to Russia's national security were of an internal nature. Therefore it would make sense that the revised Military Doctrine as well as other security documents took account of the increased importance of non-nuclear military means, which would correspond with the current threat perception.

Another positive effect was the conviction that power struggle among security departments definitely should make place for overall command and control by one security organ. The conflicts in and around Chechnya perfectly made clear, that especially shortcomings in command and control had resulted in the failures of the military. The latest edition of the Military Doctrine (2000), as well as the way warfare was conducted in the second Chechen conflict, emphasizing joint performance of operations by forces and troops, showed that the military leadership had learned from its failures in the past. The fact that this policy was now extended to anti-terror operations in Russia as a whole was justified and logical. On the subject of appointing a principal and coordinating security institution in charge of anti-terror action, and taking into account Putin's demand for centralized control of security policy, Russia's Security Council (SCRF), consisting of the President and the chiefs of all security departments and services, was likely to be selected for this capacity.

On the other hand, the ambivalence came to the fore with regard to the trend of the proposed revision in security policy, stressing military solutions and not social-economic ones. The large number of policy concepts and laws, which were to be drafted in the aftermath of 'Nord-Ost', unmistakably highlighted stress on military and political solutions to the problem of terrorism. Another feature of ambivalence was the fact that Russian authorities repeatedly made it clear that the RF granted itself the right to attack terrorists abroad. This option to use force abroad was not to be conducted by an invasion of troops, but by employing precision guided munitions in operations against terrorist training camps or against other targets out of the country, which were related to international terrorism<sup>17)</sup>. By doing so, the RF permitted itself to violate norms of international law, such as the prohibition of using force and the non-intervention principle, as laid down in the UN Charter.

The aforementioned policy intentions of using military force against internal (terrorist) threats and if necessary against targets abroad as well were not new concepts. These entries were already included in the existing security documents but were now to be stepped up. The emphasis in security policy remained on military instead of social-economic solutions, although a swift from external to internal threats was rightly included. This gave the impression that current policy principles were continued. Consequently, 'Nord-Ost' did not result in a watershed for Russian security policy.

**"Putin's reputation was at stake, he simply could not afford to lose this battle."**

## Putin's Comprehensive Security Policy: The Revised National Security Concept

*On 29 October 2002 President Putin instructed his security ministers and chiefs to draft a revision of the National Security Concept (NSC), Russia's overarching security document. After Beslan a revision of the NSC again came to the fore as one of the policy measures. On 29 September 2004 Igor Ivanov, Secretary of the SCRF, announced that Russia would review its NSC in the light of the war against international terrorism. Ivanov noted that the present concept was adopted in 2000, before the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and therefore it did not reflect the new reality.<sup>a)</sup> Surprisingly, no mentioning was made that already in October 2002 Putin had ordered such a revision of the NSC. Apparently, until Beslan the anticipated revision had not left the stage of rhetoric. Very recently, more details of the contents of a new NSC have been released. On 1 February 2005, at a scientific conference on the NSC, Igor Ivanov explained the current phase of development of the highest security document. He made clear that key issues in the new NSC will be social-economic problems, the fight against terrorism, disparities in development among Russia's regions, insufficient funding for science and technology, environmental and demographic problems, as well as public confidence in government bodies and state institutions.<sup>b)</sup> However, most of these entries were also listed in previous editions of the NSC, such as the current one of 2000. Furthermore, the assessment that internal social-economic problems are the most complicated and urgent trial for Russia has also been stated before but without any doubt demonstrates a realistic view of Russia's present situation. The bottom line, as discussed more than once in this article, is whether the observation of the prominence of internal problems will result in decision making in that direction. Until now Russia's conservative security establishment has always been able to bypass a social-economic approach and solution by putting a military approach to external as well as internal security on the agenda. Let us see if this time other actors will be strong enough in order that the new NSC and the resulting policy measures will provide a genuine answer to the challenges of Russia.»*

### Kadernoten

a) 'Russia to review its National Security Concept', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newline, (Vol 8), (No 187) 1 October 2004.

b) 'National security strategy is being aligned with practice', Izvestia, 3 February 2005.

### Beslan hostage taking

In September 2004 Chechen terrorists captured more than 1.000 teachers, parents and children of a school in Beslan in the North Caucasus, during the festivities at the opening of the new educational year. On the morning of 3 September armed Ossetian civilians allegedly opened fire at the terrorists which set off fighting between hostage takers and RF anti-terror units, in which the latter were unprepared for storming the building at that moment. As a result of the fighting 300 to 400 hostages and servicemen got killed. Just as in 'Nord-Ost' the

FSB anti-terror units Vympel and Alfa took the lead in bringing the hostage taking to an end<sup>18)</sup>. 'Beslan' was not the only terror attack in this period; the week before suicide bomb attacks at a Moscow metro station and on board of two Russian airliners killed some 100 people<sup>19)</sup>.

### Assessment of Russia's anti-terror policy

To a large extent the policy responses after 'Beslan' were similar to those taken in the aftermath of 'Nord-Ost'. In their statements the political and military leadership of the

MoD repeated their views of 2002, maintaining that war had been declared against Russia and that, if necessary, (preventive) attacks of Russian forces against terrorists abroad would be carried out. Likewise, politicians such as State Duma Speaker and former Minister of Internal Affairs Boris Gryzlov stated that new legislative initiatives against terror attacks would be presented to the Duma in short order <sup>20)</sup> Furthermore, President Putin ordered the creation in the Southern Federal District - including Chechnya - of operative groups to coordinate the anti-terrorism activities of all security agencies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the FSB, the MoD and the Emergency Situations Ministry. Thus, Putin endeavored to establish a single command of joint operations against terrorists <sup>21)</sup>. A new and unusual step taken was that the RF asked for an extraordinary session of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), a request which was not made at previous terror attacks, such as 'Nord-Ost' <sup>22)</sup>.

At the special session of the UNSC Russia asked for and received an unqualified condemnation of the hostage taking. This UNSC resolution provided Russia with the acknowledgement that the Chechen conflict was part of international terrorism, which would legitimize its actions in Chechnya. However, this international recognition did not mean that Russia allowed the international community to interfere in its internal conflict in Chechnya. Viewed from a point of view of international law, Russia is entitled to deny Chechnya independence. At the break-up of the Soviet Union it was formally agreed that only the Soviet republics would gain independence, whereas lower administrative entities, such as autonomous republics within a Soviet republic, would remain part of that sovereign republic. Moreover, during Chechnya's de facto independence from 1996-

1999, the anarchy and reign of warlords and bandits did not convince the outside world that Chechnya was able to rule itself in a proper way. Conversely, while maintaining its legal control over Chechnya, Russia could allow foreign institutions, such as NGOs and international organizations, such as OSCE and EU, to enter this region with relief and social-economic activities. Moreover, the RF could grant Chechnya more autonomy and a leadership which is not closely related to the Kremlin as it is now. This would improve the circumstances of the population, weaken the position of terrorist groups and reduce the violence, in neighboring areas such as North-Ossetia and Dagestan as well. However, a large part of the military and political elite in Russia will consider foreign 'interference' and a political settlement as signs of weakness. It is therefore not likely that the RF will change its present policy towards Chechnya. Equally, terror attacks by Chechen separatists are likely to continue. In 2002 President Putin took a large number of measures in order to adapt legislation and to reform the troops of the MoD and of the other ministries with armed formations to handle the threat of terrorism. 'Beslan' has shown that new laws and military reforms are insufficient. Legal and military measures are not enough. At the bottom of the threat of terrorism are social and economic roots: unemployment, poverty, lack of education, housing and medical care. Putin has announced that he will also take measures in the social-economic field. However, Russian governments have made similar statements after the first (1994-1996) and second Chechen wars. It will be for the benefit of the population of Russia as a whole when this time these promises will be fulfilled. ««

## Noten

1) Disclaimer: the views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Netherlands Ministry of Defense.

2) The text on 'Nord-Ost' is derived from M. de Haas, *Russian Security and Air Power (1992-2002): The development of Russian security thinking under Yeltsin and Putin and its consequences for the air forces* (London, New York: Frank Cass Publishers, ISBN 0-714-65608-9, August 2004), pp. 198-204.

3) V. Solov'ev, 'I vsë-taki my pobedim', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, No. 39 (309), 1 November 2002, p. 1.

4) 'New military offensive in Chechnya', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Security and Terrorism Watch*, (Vol. 3), (No. 39) 5 November 2002; 'Backs harsh reaction', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Security Watch*, (Vol. 3), (No. 39) 5 November 2002.

5) Solov'ev, 'I vsë-taki my pobedim'; V. Udmantsev, 'My gotovim universal'nykh soldat', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, No. 39 (309), 1 November 2002, p. 3.

6) A. Sudoplatov, 'Voyna tol'ko nachinayetsya', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, No. 39 (309), 1 November 2002, p. 1.

7) 'Nord-Ost', dossier *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 2002, [www.ng.ru/special/NordOst](http://www.ng.ru/special/NordOst); A. Khokhlov, 'We did not injure a single hostage', *Izvestiya*, 28 October 2002, p. 1.

8) Solov'ev, 'I vsë-taki my pobedim'; 'Duma allocates more funds for fighting terrorism', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Security Watch*, (Vol. 3), (No. 41) 19 November 2002.

9) 'Nord-Ost', dossier *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 2002.

10) Udmantsev, 'My gotovim universal'nykh soldat'.

11) 'Defense minister says Russia is at war', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Security Watch*, (Vol. 3), (No. 40) 12 November 2002.

12) V. Solov'ev, 'Nash Genshtab otvetchayet NATO', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, No. 2 (317), 24 January 2003, pp. 1, 3.

13) S. Sokolov, 'Poslesloviye k "Nord-Ostu"', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, No. 39 (309), 1 November 2002, p. 8, and 'Neobkhodima reorganizatsiya spetssluzhb Rossii', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, No. 40 (310), 15 November 2002, p. 1; S. Bogdanov, 'Voyna vne zakona', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, No. 38 (308), 25 October 2002, p. 4; 'Orders revision of national security concept', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Security and Terrorism Watch*, (Vol. 3), (No. 39) 5 November 2002; A.I. Nikolayev, 'U nas - terroristicheskaya voyna', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, No. 40 (310), 26 November 2002, p. 1.

14) Bogdanov, 'Voyna vne zakona'.

15) Sokolov, 'Poslesloviye k "Nord-Ostu"', and 'Neobkhodima reorganizatsiya spetssluzhb Rossii'; Nikolayev, 'U nas - terroristicheskaya voyna'.

16) V. Solov'ev, 'Zvezday po terrorismu', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, No. 42 (312), 29 November 2002, p. 1.

17) 'Defence minister says Russia is at war'.

18) 'Russian elite antiterror units suffer worst casualties in its history', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newslines*, (Vol. 8), (No. 170) 7 September 2004.

19) 'War on terror: Russia girds itself for war', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Russian Political Weekly*, (Vol. 4), (No. 34) 2 September 2004.

20) 'War on terror: Russia girds itself for war'.

21) 'Putin creates system for emergency military administration in Southern Russia', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newslines*, (Vol. 8), (No. 173) 10 September 2004.

22) 'War on terror: Russia girds itself for war'.