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E-NOTES

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RUSSIA AND THE BOSTON BOMBINGS: THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

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As U.S. intelligence and law enforcement struggle to assemble a complete picture of the Boston Marathon bombings, new questions have emerged about the Russian explanations for their actions in the case.

In a letter to President Obama May 20, President Putin called for developing U.S.–Russian relations on the basis of an “honest dialogue” without “new irritants,” a reference to the Magnitsky Law, which bars Russian officials involved in the murder of the Russian anti-corruption lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, from the U.S.

The fact that the Russians framed their call for “dialogue” on the basis of an implicit call to the U.S. to ignore Russian officials’ crimes should itself be reason to question their motives. But even more unsettling is an article, April 27, in the independent newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta* in which Russian officials explain their actions during the six months in 2012 when Tamerlan Tsarnaev was staying in Dagestan, a Russian region. The intention of officials in talking to *Novaya Gazeta* may have been to suggest that there was a reasonable attempt to keep track of Tsarnaev but the impression that is created is exactly the opposite.

Officials in the Dagestan Center for the Struggle with Extremism told *Novaya Gazeta* that, although Tsarnaev came to the attention of the Federal Security Service (FSB) a year earlier, they only became aware of him after he made contact in Dagestan with Makhmud Nidal, a suspected recruiter for the insurgency. They said a check of Tsarnaev’s telephone did not produce results, he did not visit any forbidden sites and he had no suspicious contacts, except for Nidal. As a result, he was not interrogated.

This treatment, if the statement is accurate, was far different than that meted out to William Plotnikov, another foreigner who traveled to Dagestan in search of the insurgency. Plotnikov, a 21-year-old Russian-Canadian convert to Islam was detained in Dagestan in December 2010 and, according to the newspaper, “worked over” first by agents of the anti-extremism center and then agents of the FSB “with a wide arsenal of special means,” a phrase usually meant to describe beatings and torture. It was during these interrogations that Plotnikov gave the FSB the name of Tsarnaev and others with whom he was in contact over social networking sites and it was shortly afterward, in March, 2011, that the FSB signaled its interest in Tsarnaev to the FBI.

On May 19, 2012, Nidal was killed in an operation by Russian forces. According to *Novaya Gazeta*, he did not surrender because he knew the authorities had “too much information on him.” Despite the fact that Nidal was a committed insurgent, however, the Russian authorities still supposedly made no effort to detain and question Tsarnaev. Two months later, on July 14, 2012, in the course of another operation, Plotnikov was killed along with

seven other insurgents. Novaya Gazeta could not learn from its sources if they knew whether Tsarnaev had met Plotnikov in Dagestan but Plotnikov was now the second member of the insurgency killed after having been in contact with Tsarnaev. Surprisingly given the security blanket in Dagestan, this also did not lead to the detention and interrogation of Tsarnaev.

Dagestani officials told Novaya Gazeta that after Plotnikov's death, they went to the home of Tsarnaev's father who told them that his son had left for the U.S. They checked bus stations, flights and railroad stations but did not find him and, they said that they assumed that he had joined the insurgency. In the meantime, Tsarnaev apparently flew to Moscow from the Caucasian city of Mineralny Vody and on July 17, without waiting to pick up the new Russian passport for which he had supposedly traveled to Russia, left Sheremetevo Airport for the U.S.

The first Russian warning to the FBI about Tsarnaev in March 2011 had been, according to U.S. officials, "extremely thin," devoid of details or examples. The FBI asked for more information but did not get it. A second warning sent to the CIA in September 2011 was identical to the first. After Tsarnaev left Russia ten months later, having been in contact with at least one member of the insurgency who was later killed and possibly two, there was no information from Russia at all.

The article in Novaya Gazeta contains the first acknowledgement by any Russian officials that Tsarnaev was under surveillance while he was in Russia. It is devoid, however, of important information, such as whether Tsarnaev was in contact with Plotnikov in Dagestan and is careful to suggest that the surveillance was carried out only by local anti-terrorism officials and not the FSB, making it easier for the FSB to deny knowledge of what Tsarnaev was doing in Dagestan. The article also reports the highly implausible claim of Dagestani officials that after Tsarnaev left Dagestan, the surveillance reports on him were removed from the archives (and presumably destroyed.)

The failure of the Russians to share information critical to the protection of U.S. civilians may have led to a U.S. attempt to recruit an FSB agent who was in a position to tell the U.S. more than was being obtained officially. There are now reports in the Russian press that the FSB agent in question had traveled together with U.S. investigators to the North Caucasus.

In any case, Ryan Fogle, a CIA agent working under diplomatic cover, was arrested on May 13. A video of the arrest was shown on Russian television and Russian officials took the gratuitous and almost unprecedented step of publicly naming the American CIA resident in Moscow.

Fogle was shown in a blonde wig and he was said to have been in possession of a map of Moscow, compass and detailed letter in Russian promising huge payments to the prospective recruit if he agreed to cooperate. The pro-regime newspaper, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, ridiculed U.S. intelligence by suggesting that American spies were caught because they had been using the same type of wigs for 30 years and running an article in which Russians tried to find their way around Moscow with a compass.

The case of Fogle, however, is almost certainly a provocation. The recruitment of agents is practically never carried out in Moscow and the idea that a CIA agent would meet a potential recruit carrying a detailed contract proposal is beyond belief. At the same time, the articles supposedly found on Fogle have not been used in espionage for at least the last 30 years. He was filmed with these items in his possession and wearing a wig but the real reason for the incident is likely to be far different than the explanation being offered in the Russian press.

It is possible that the incident involving Fogle and the massive publicity that it received in Russia is the Putin regime's way of discouraging the U.S. from trying to find out what really happened during the six months that Tsarnaev spent in Dagestan.

Putin in his letter to Obama called for "concrete steps" to improve relations. The U.S. side has a right to insist that the first concrete step in this direction—regardless of the much needed Magnitsky Law—should be genuine cooperation from the Russian side in the strengthening of American domestic security.