



# FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

## E-NOTES

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## RUSSIA AND THE BOSTON BOMBINGS

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In the wake of the bombing of the Boston Marathon, President Obama has thanked Vladimir Putin for his help and agreed on closer cooperation with Russia on counter-terrorism. The wisdom of drawing closer to Russia in the battle against terrorism, however, remains far from clear.

Ahmed Zakaev, the representative of the Chechen separatist government in London, said that the Marathon bombings were a “gift to Putin and the Kremlin.” This is almost certainly true. All indications are that Putin, far from being concerned about the Boston bombings, is fixated on how the tragedy can be used.

The Russian authorities have been at pains to identify the Tsarnaev brothers with the Islamic rebels in the North Caucasus and to convey the impression that in fighting against the rebels in the region they are also protecting the U.S. In fact, however, the existing indications are that the Tsarnaevs were not connected to the insurgency.

The Dagestani wing of the insurgency has formally denied any role in the bombings. In a statement posted, April 21 on the website vDagestan.com, its leaders said that their primary enemy is Russia and they are “not engaged in military hostilities with the United States.” In their statement they accused Russia of “occupation of the Caucasus and monstrous crimes against Muslims.” To the extent that the U.S. is involved in the region, U.S. supported human rights groups have tried to document these crimes.

Doku Umarov, the leader of the North Caucasus Islamic insurgency, in the past, has been quick to take credit for mass casualty terrorist attacks in Russia, including two suicide bombings on the Moscow metro in March, 2010 and the suicide bombing of the arrivals hall at the Domodedovo Airport in January, 2011. In the case of both of these attacks, video addresses by Umarov were posted on the internet almost immediately. But Umarov announced a moratorium on attacks even on Russian civilians in February, 2012 after mass protests in Moscow against Putin. By all indications, he has so far kept his word.

In general, it is not easy to join the North Caucasian insurgency. Because of the danger of infiltration by the security services, the insurgency’s websites do not offer any indication of how to make contact. Instead, agents of the insurgency seek out persons in mosques who they deem to be potentially suitable recruits.

In addition to the fact that there is no evidence linking the Tsarnaevs to the insurgency, there is also reason to believe that the Russians are not telling the U.S. everything they know about the Tsarnaevs or the bombings.

In 2011, the Russians warned both the FBI and the CIA that Tamerlan Tsarnaev was a follower of radical Islam and was preparing to leave the U.S. to join “unspecified underground groups.” They did not mention until last week that they had secretly recorded a telephone conversation in which Tamerlan vaguely discussed jihad with his mother, including the possibility of Tamerlan going to Palestine. In another conversation, Zubeidat Tsarnaeva, the bombers’ mother, spoke with a man in the Caucasus region who was under FBI investigation.

Despite repeated requests, the Russians provided no information at the time capable of lending weight to their

warning that Tsarnaev was dangerous. Acting on an unsupported tip, the FBI conducted a very limited investigation under the FBI's internal guidelines. When the FBI turned up no evidence, the inquiry was dropped.

Despite the Russians' professed concern over him, Tsarnaev received a Russian visa. He entered and left Russia through Moscow's Sheremetevo Airport, Russia's principal international air hub. He spent six months in Dagestan and Chechnya where the behavior of the Russian authorities is even more difficult to understand. Tsarnaev was supposedly never detained and interrogated by either local police or the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).

FSB surveillance in Dagestan is very tight. Jean-Francois Ratelle, a professor at George Washington University who worked in Dagestan on the radicalization of youth, told the Voice of America that the fact that he grew a beard and spent time with young radicals led to him being under constant surveillance and detained several times and questioned.

If Tsarnaev was not detained despite the earlier warning to the U.S., it raises questions about the effectiveness of Russian anti-terrorist efforts and therefore the value of U.S. – Russian cooperation. It is also possible, however, that the Russian authorities, as in the case of the 2011 warning, know much more than they are letting on.

Besides linking the Tsarnaevs to their Islamist enemies and failing to clarify aspects of their own behavior, the Russians are seeking to use the bombings for obvious political purposes. In the wake of the bombings, Putin's extended his condolences to President Obama. But at the same time, he denounced the West for supporting terrorists identified as "freedom fighters" and giving them "financial and political support." His spokesman, Dmitri Peskov, indicated the Boston bombings were a lesson to those with reservations about Russia's war in the North Caucasus. "There is no such thing as our terrorists and somebody else's," he said. "They all deserve the same approach, the same rejection."

In fact, however, the Russian authorities have few qualms about supporting terrorism when it serves their purposes. Ramzan Kadyrov, the Russian backed president of Chechnya, for example, according to convincing reports by human rights groups, has engaged in the widespread torture and murder of civilians.

Perhaps the best example of the terror in Chechnya is the fate of Natalya Estemirova, who worked for the Chechen branch of the Memorial human rights society. A single mother, she was abducted on the street in Grozny and murdered on July 15, 2009. Estemirova was almost the only source of information on torture and murders carried out by the security services under Kadyrov. After her death, the Chechen Memorial was closed.

The Russian press has sought to use the Boston events for a number of purposes. One is to neutralize possible future Western reaction to brutal Russian measures to prevent disruptions of the February 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. Dmitri Kiselyev, a commentator for the television station, Rossiya 1 suggested that America was paying the price for its "incorrect" attitude toward the Chechen war.

On April 24, the Russian state owned newspaper, Izvestiya reported that while in Dagestan, Tsarnaev studied radicalism at a workshop run jointly by a Georgian NGO and the U.S. Jamestown Foundation. This information was supposedly obtained from the files of the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Gia Ghambashidze, the head of the Georgian NGO said that the allegations in the Izvestiya article were not true and the report appears outlandish. The timing of the report, however, is not an accident. Russia has enacted a law requiring NGOs that receive foreign funds to register as foreign agents and Golos, the NGO which is responsible for monitoring the honesty of the Russian elections, has just become the first Russian NGO to be fined for refusing to register. A report like the Izvestiya article is intended to persuade Russians that the threat posed by NGOs is real.

In his latest comment on the Boston bombings, Putin said that, "if we [the U.S. and Russia] combine our efforts, we will not suffer blows like that." This statement ignores the fact that the U.S. cannot be associated with the disappearance of thousands of persons in counter-terrorism security sweeps in Chechnya and that the number of terrorist acts in Russia has climbed steadily in Russia under Putin's rule.

There is genuine shock over the Boston bombings on the part of many Russians but the regime's professed sympathy for the U.S. should be treated with skepticism despite the embrace of it by President Obama. There are too many unanswered questions about the Russian role in the Boston events to put faith in Putin's good will.