



Research Report

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“The attack on Domodedovo”

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The attack and response

At 1630 on Monday 24th January a bomb exploded at Domodedovo airport inflicting serious loss of life. An initial official estimate by the Minister for Health, Tatiana Golikova, put the death toll at 29 with 130 injured, many critically. During the night the figure rose to 35 dead, 180 injured, according to the National Anti-terrorist Committee (NAK) and the Ministry for Emergency Situations (MChS).

President Medvedev convened a meeting some two hours after the attack. During the meeting, he instructed the Transport Ministry, Ministry of the Interior (MVD) and Federal Security Service (FSB) to implement an emergency regime at transport hubs across Russia, and the Prosecutor General to verify compliance with regulations on security at major transport hubs. Chairman of the Investigative Committee (SK), Alexander Bastrykin, was instructed to appoint a team to examine the attack.² The Ministries for Health and Social Development and Emergency Situations were instructed to provide the necessary assistance to victims. Moscow’s Mayor, Sergei Sobyanin and Moscow Regional Governor Boris Gromov subsequently met the President to update him.

The Investigation

Official statements indicate that 88 investigators and criminologists of the SK, cooperating with officers from the MVD and FSB are conducting the investigation along several lines of inquiry, and have initially reported the explosion was caused by a bomb of up to 5kg of TNT, packed with metallic objects, wiring and balls.

Initial blame has fallen on bandit/Wahhabite groups from the North Caucasus. Nevertheless, the overall situation remains unclear, as numerous accounts are emerging in the public domain about how many and who carried out the attack, and how it was done.

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² It is noteworthy that neither the Minister for Internal Affairs, Rashid Nurgaliev, nor the Director of the FSB, Alexander Bortnikov, was actually present at the meeting. Nor was Prime Minister Putin.

- Some reports suggest that the bomb may have had the power of up to 7 kg of TNT, which would represent a substantial difference in effect in such a closed space.
- Some are suggesting that the bomb might have been brought in on an aircraft but that detonation which should have taken place during flight was delayed, while others suggest the device was introduced to the area from the ground.³
- The number of fatalities may rise, not simply given the large number of critically injured in hospital, but because some accounts put the initial death toll much higher.
- Whether the security services knew about the attack in advance or not is also being publicly discussed in the Russian (and now international) media: police sources have suggested that security services were aware that terrorists were planning an attack on a Moscow airport, but were unable to locate and detain the suspects. This is denied by the security services.

If the specifics of this attack remain vague, however, some important light is being shed on domestic politics in Russia, particularly the continuing problem of terrorism, the implementation of legislation and balance of power.

In his public addresses on the 24th and 25th January, President Medvedev has reiterated that terrorism remains the most severe threat Russia faces. Regular attacks take place in Russia, particularly, but not only in the North Caucasus region, including assassination attempts, attacks on law enforcement officials and bombings. Speaking to the FSB on the 25th, he stated that it is the ‘most serious signal’ to the FSB and NAK and other law enforcement structures that in 2010 the number of terrorist acts increased. ‘This was a well planned terrorist attack aimed at killing as many people as possible’, he stated. He has called on the security services to resolve this ‘brutal’ crime,⁴ and that the bandits be exposed and brought to court. The ‘nest of bandits... must be liquidated’ and those who resist ‘destroyed on the spot’ (‘unichtozheni na meste’).

Negligence?

Of particular interest, however, is how the President has approached the Russian law enforcement agencies, which are undergoing a period of reforms. ‘Responsibility cannot just be shoved aside onto the police’, he stated, posing questions about the responsibilities of the FSB, MVD and airport authorities. The ‘leadership of the FSB should work with the question of responsibility of officials in its own service’, Medvedev stated before demanding that Alexander Bortnikov, Director of the FSB, present appropriate suggestions.

Medvedev has emphasised in speeches on both 24th and 25th the need to follow up investigations into the airport security measures and management and even the law enforcement bodies themselves. He is especially critical of the failure to implement

³ Whether the suitcase was set off by accident as it was opened or detonated by remote control is also being debated – which may cast questions on it being a deliberate suicide attack.

⁴ ‘Zverskoye prestupleniye’ could be translated as either a ‘brutal’ or a ‘bestial crime’.

new, tougher legislation passed after previous attacks. On 24th, in his initial meeting, the President instructed Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika to investigate the compliance with laws and enforcement of security measures at the airport. On the 25th, responding to questions from journalists, Medvedev reiterated that ‘what has happened here shows that there were clearly breaches in security, and everyone who makes decisions here, including the airport management, will answer for this’. The SK also established a special working group devoted particularly to investigating events leading up to the explosion, including the role of the law enforcement organs and the documentation regulating airport security activities. Bastrykin announced on the 25th that it is established that to ‘enter the hall in which the explosion took place, the terrorist had hardly any work to do, because in fact there does not exist adequate systems of control of entry into the airport complex’.

It is worth noting, however, that the airport authorities have officially denied negligence. In a statement on the 25th, the airport published a statement online that means of security for passengers and baggage were in place and in working order. Interestingly, this statement is intended to rebut ‘reports in the mass media’.⁵ Airport officials also assert that all security measures for which they were responsible were in place and fulfilled.

A New Look Team (Under Pressure)

Although the officials leading the Russian government’s response are familiar, the landscape of power has shifted, altering the relative power of the organisations responding to the attack. Sergei Sobyenin, Head of the Presidential Administration between 2005 and 2010, replaced Yuri Luzhkov as Mayor of Moscow in October 2010 (Luzhkov had been Mayor since 1992). The MVD is under pressure following a spate of high-profile scandals – and some suggest that Rashid Nurgaliev, Minister of the Interior since 2004, may be replaced when the new law on the police comes into effect in early March.

Also, over the last two weeks, new executive orders on the status of the SK came into being on 15th January, and then on 21st Medvedev met Bastrykin and announced the signing of the executive order appointing him Chairman of the SK. The new role of the SK is particularly important, since it establishes it as an independent structure answering directly to the President, expands the SK’s jurisdiction and establishes it as a separate, consolidating body in charge of conducting investigations with guaranteed non-interference in its activities by government bodies, individual officials or NGOs. The SK is supposed both to be able to influence general procedural discipline in Russia on the one hand and act as a body with its own procedural juridical powers. Its independence is thus significantly changing the layout of power in Russia.

The adjustment of authority structures in Russia, establishing a new Mayor and his subordinates and strengthening of the SK as an independent power structure removing certain powers from the Prosecutor General’s office and MVD, has not, however, come without opposition from some quarters. Some observers, for instance, suggest competition between the Prosecutor General’s office and the SK. Moreover,

⁵ http://www.domodedovo.ru/ru/main/news/press_rel/?ID=2987

Mayor Sobyenin has had a difficult first couple of months in office, having had to deal with a significant spate of civil disturbance in Moscow. Bastrykin immediately upon being appointed, went to Stavropol to lead the investigation into a mass murder, the second mass murder investigation in a couple of months.

Conclusions

Further information will doubtless emerge over the next few days, and observers should be wary of conspiracy theories and chatter. Important questions remain to be answered, such as the nature of the specific target: Domodedovo is the major international airport in Russia. It may be that the terrorists were seeking to target not just Russians, but foreign visitors as well.

Beyond the tragic reminder that terrorism is a major problem in Russia, three inter-related main points that emerge about Russian domestic politics at this early stage:

- The Russian leadership has significant concerns about the coordination and particularly implementation of its orders. Both the “vertical of power” of authority and the “horizontal of coordination” between agencies continue to face numerous problems.
- The law enforcement agencies, particularly the MVD, are under significant pressure. Not only are there numerous – and increasing – numbers of terrorist acts, but there are many other major crimes, and, on occasion, the law enforcement bodies themselves are implicated. The question of “responsibility” and “public accountability” is an increasingly important one, raised regularly by the Russian media. In the past after such events, senior figures have not been among those fired. While there is scepticism in the Russian media that serious firings or resignations of senior figures would either take place or even have much effect, observers should not be blind to the political implications of changes amongst the most senior officials in the run up to elections this year (parliamentary) and next (presidential).
- The power landscape in Russia is slowly changing as a new independent power structure – the SK – has emerged. Medvedev himself has played an important role in initiating this evolution and has not ruled out that the jurisdiction and power of the SK may increase further. It is noteworthy that within days of Bastrykin’s new appointment, two significant events focus attention on the SK. It is a major opportunity for the organisation to prove itself.