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PERSPECTIVE

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The Drama Behind 'Nord-Ost'

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On 24 October, the second day of the "Nord-Ost" hostage drama in Moscow, accompanied by officers of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the City Division for Combating Organized Crime (GUBOP) of the interior ministry (MVD), I visited the operations center where preparations were underway to storm the theater. I was there not as a journalist, but as a person who has spent years working to free hostages held in Chechnya, to offer a strategy that had met with some success in the past: inducing imprisoned or detained Chechens to assist in hostage-release negotiations. Notorious criminals who are now in Russian jails (such as radical field commander Salman Raduev or the hostage-taker Lecha Islamov, nicknamed "the Beard") in some cases can exercise authority over other hostage-takers, persuading them to release the individuals they are holding. In exchange, the prisoners usually have expected the government to support their parole requests or, in cases where the prisoner is in pre-trial detention, to allow him out on bail.

Islamov's wife, Luisa Ustarkhanova, and Said Salim Batsiev, who had served as an intermediary in the past, were present in the operations center. They informed me that Akhmad Kadyrov, the head of Chechnya's pro-Russian administration, had sent them there for the same purpose I had in mind. Kadyrov had coordinated his efforts with Colonel General Vladimir Pronichev, the deputy director of the FSB and the commander on the scene. While I was at the center several persons in handcuffs, apparently members of Chechen gangs, were brought in. Ustarkhanova was trying to obtain the release of hostages from the theater in the hope that the authorities would consider shortening her husband's nine-year jail term. Although neither she nor the other

Chechens were allowed to enter the theater, some did talk to Movsar Baraev, the leader of the terrorists, on his mobile phone. However, all their pleas were rejected.

Baraev's initial demand was that Russian troops begin to pull out of Chechnya; he declared that he was under Shamil Basaev's orders.¹ On the evening of 24 October, Mark Franchetti, a journalist with the London Sunday Times, talked to Baraev in person. Baraev sought an immediate start of peace talks between representatives of the Russian president and Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov. Negotiations with Baraev, attempted by the Duma deputies and other public figures who entered the theater on 25 October, failed. It became clear that he was not budging from his stated goal of forcing Russia to begin immediate peace talks, and was unwilling to settle for anything less.

FSB takes the lead

Although I do not have all the relevant details, it seems that the Russian security services were planning to storm the theater at the same time that these negotiation efforts were being made. Apparently, the decision to take the theater by force was reached fairly early in the standoff. On 25 October, special forces units practiced the planned rescue operation in a distant part of Moscow, in the "Meridian" theater, an exact replica of the cultural center where "Nord-Ost" was being performed. Not only was the FSB in overall command of the operation, but the service's elite Alpha unit played the major role in storming the theater. The MVD special forces unit Vityaz participated in the operation, but for the most part was responsible only for maintaining the cordon around the theater. By the time the special forces stormed the theater, they knew the exact layout and had been informed by escaped hostages where the fighters were located. Hence they were in a favorable position to execute the raid.

Early in the morning on 26 October, a poisonous gas, the exact contents of which have not been identified to date, was pumped into the theater. Whereas two persons were shot by the terrorists (in both instances actions by the victims had precipitated the hostage-takers' response), the gas caused the death of at least 120 hostages.

Government spokesmen insist that the operation was implemented in a highly competent manner and was successful. Yet Novaya gazeta has published the memorandum of a special public commission, chaired by Duma Deputy and SPS leader Boris Nemtsov, which concluded that the security services assigned top priority to killing the terrorists and did not do enough to save the lives of the hostages.² Indeed, given that they had two and a half days to plan, the coordination between the FSB and the crew of emergency workers should have been better organized. Some victims have initiated lawsuits against the Moscow city government for failure competently to organize the emergency response. However, judging from what I observed in the staff headquarters, although the emergencies ministry (MChS) and the city administration were represented, they played a subordinate role, whereas the FSB was responsible for coordinating and executing the operation.

Some details of the drama in Moscow are being revealed, while a great deal remains undisclosed. A clearer picture would require placing this hostage-taking incident in the broader context of the kidnapping epidemic which overtook Chechnya in the period between the two Chechen wars. As an Army officer, I fought in Chechnya during 1995-1996. From 1996 until the summer of 1998 I served on the presidential commission that was seeking to free prisoners and find persons missing in action as well as discovering graves in Chechnya. After my retirement I continued in an unofficial capacity (as a Novaya gazeta correspondent) to facilitate the release of military prisoners as well as civilians of different nationalities who were held captive in Chechnya. In the course of this activity, I traveled regularly to Chechnya and met with different field commanders who had led units during the war and with representatives of bandit formations whose main activity was the hostage trade. Hence my judgments are based on what I saw in the staff headquarters during the "Nord-Ost" hostage-taking as well as over the course of eight years in Chechnya.

The players

Movsar Baraev, the leader of the terrorists who seized the theater, previously operated under his father's last name, Suleimanov. Movsar's mother is the sister of Arbi Baraev, a famous hostage-taker who kidnapped and murdered hundreds of persons, but won particular notoriety for beheading four foreign telecom workers in December 1998. After Arbi Baraev was killed in the summer of 2001, Movsar took his mother's maiden name in his uncle's honor. Prior to the events of 23-26 October, the name Movsar Baraev was not well known, even among counter-terrorism specialists. Movsar Baraev's unit included one of his uncle's widows and two widows of the Akhmadov brothers (infamous hostage-takers who, during the interwar period, quite openly maintained a jail in Urus-Martan).

For the time being, the question remains how 50 persons, including some with family names familiar to authorities like Akhmadov, were able to reach Moscow and launch this terrorist act. It is highly unlikely that this endeavor could have come off without bribes to members of the notoriously corrupt security services. Moreover, Arbi Baraev was known to have the protection of Chechen FSB agents; his protectors remain close to the Kadyrov administration even now.³ Soon after the raid on the theater, some names of possible accomplices from among the security services were mentioned in the press and it was rumored that the FSB had advance warning of the terrorist threat. Yet, so far these rumors have not been confirmed. To date, no one has been charged with being an accessory.

There are reasons to doubt that Movsar and his followers were ready to blow themselves up together with the hostages. The terrorists allowed dozens of persons to escape the theater and did not shoot at those who fled at the start of the ordeal. Quite a few public figures attempted to negotiate with Baraev's gang - Irina Khakamada and Boris Nemtsov from SPS, Chechen Duma Deputy Aslanbek Aslakhonov, former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, the singer Iosif Kobzon, and the surgeon Leonid Roshal. While these personalities emanate from very different segments of the public spectrum,

they have one factor in common -- they cannot be viewed as representatives of Russia's "war party."

All those who attempted mediation remarked on differences between hostage-takers with regard to treatment of the captives. Whereas Movsar Baraev and his deputy Abubakar were rather harsh, some of the others had been kinder and tried to comfort the hostages. At the same time, the various mediators were not able to achieve even relatively modest goals, such as the release of children. Some commented that Baraev was unable to formulate his demands in a clear manner. Whereas the terrorists had promised to release Georgians, they did not, in fact, do so. They had offered to release Chechens; however, the only Chechen in attendance, Yakha Neserkhaeva, was too frightened to approach them and ashamed to leave her Russian friend behind. After the raid she was arrested from her hospital bed and held in a prison hospital. She had come to the theater at the invitation of an ethnic Russian acquaintance, who then resorted to public appeals in the media to obtain Neserkhaeva's eventual release from detention.

The Maskhadov connection?

Russian society is used to regarding figures such as Raduev, Basaev and Baraev as terrorists. Aslan Maskhadov, however, generally is seen as a much more complicated figure. Yet information is pointing to a connection between the Chechen president and October's hostage-takers. Russian authorities are pressing Britain to extradite Maskhadov's representative, Akhmed Zakaev, and are charging him with kidnapping a priest in 1996. Significantly, Russia has not accused Zakaev of being an accomplice in the "Nord-Ost" hostage-taking; however, he made some highly impolitic remarks (to put it mildly) during the crisis.⁴

The allegation of connections between Maskhadov and hostage-takers is not surprising. The terrorist act in Moscow bears strong resemblance to two similar actions of the first Chechen war, Basaev's 1995 raid against Budennovsk and Raduev's 1996 raid against Kizlyar. Although he was not part of either group, as the head of the Chechen General

Staff Maskhadov took credit for the overall organization once the raids met with success.⁵

In the interwar period, dozens of persons, most of whom were taken hostage while transiting Chechnya by train from Stavropol to Daghestan, were held in the customs facility at Sovkhoz-15 near Khankala. I would bring letters from their desperate family members to Maskhadov, and he would say to me, "Take one with you, whomever." Or, on another occasion, he would say, "take three." Maskhadov was not profiting from this business but he was allowing others to do so. For instance, after the journalists Ilyas Bogatyrev, Vladislav Chernyaev and Elena Masyuk were ransomed, the slave traders Ali Itaev and Nurdi Bazhiev gave new guns to Maskhadov's guards. One former officer of Ichkeria's security services told me that salaries were paid only after a major ransom.

Maskhadov did not take hostages himself, but his associates did so constantly. Maskhadov personally elevated Arbi Baraev to the status of brigadier general. In the 1997 election, Maskhadov's running mate was Vakha Arsanov, who had personally received \$200,000 ransom for Chechnya's Education Minister Efim Gelman. Some associates of Maskhadov, such as Ali Itaev, head of the Chechen spetsnaz; Nurdi Bazhiev, deputy director of the Chechen MVD; and Doku Umarov, secretary of Maskhadov's Security Council, openly engaged in the hostage trade. These elements preyed upon the decent members of Maskhadov's government, such as Media Minister Lema Chabaev and Maskhadov's press secretary, Kazbek Khadzhiev, who were shot. Shadid Bargishev, the director of the anti-terrorist unit who was trying to stem hostage-taking, was blown up by a car bomb in 1998. Khunkhar-Pasha Israpilov headed another anti-terrorism unit that freed many hostages. In the summer of 1998 his attempt to free by force two British citizens, Camilla Carr and Jon James, ended in failure. By the end of 1998, the decent commanders rapidly were losing ground to the criminal element. (What Israpilov could not do with force, Boris Berezovsky was able to accomplish by paying ransom for the two Britons. Almost immediately, however, Baraev seized the foreign telecom workers.)

Maskhadov's dilemma

Maskhadov's authority ended not in the fall of 1999 with the start of the second war, but in 1998 when the criminal situation spiraled out of control. Could he have found a way out of this trap? Perhaps, but probably it would have cost him his life. Doku Umarov told me that he "accepted this position on one condition. I told Maskhadov that if he negotiates with Russia, I will be the first to put a bullet in his head." This is not an idle threat. During the January 2000 retreat from Grozny, Umarov received a serious injury, a bullet wound to the jaw. In return for treatment in Nalchik, he turned over to the Russian government Bagaudin Temirbolatov, a thug better known as "the Tractor Driver." Umarov also showed the federals where to find the body of Gennadi Shpigun, the MVD general abducted in March 1999. Last year, Umarov returned to Chechnya. He is considered to be the chief organizer of assassinations of fellow Chechens who are members of the pro-Russian administration.

Maskhadov has been trying to negotiate with Moscow because for him there are no other options. Today, the Chechen president's own associates are by far more dangerous for him than all the Russian security services taken together. At worst, the latter would kill only Maskhadov. Basaev and others like him will not show mercy to Maskhadov or his family (which is living safely in Malaysia) if Maskhadov takes any unilateral measures to end the war. The terrorist act in Moscow was an attempt to force Moscow to the negotiating table. If it had been as successful as Budennovsk and Kizlyar had been, Maskhadov would have benefited. His prestige would have risen substantially among Chechen commanders and probably in the international community.

In a 22 October interview appearing on the Chechen government website, Maskhadov asserted that he controlled all the Chechen armed forces. When the hostage-taking ordeal began on 23 October, he remained silent for two days; not until 25 October did he manage a half-hearted condemnation.⁶ Given my experiences in Chechnya, Maskhadov's tolerance for hostage-taking in the interwar period, the "humane" behavior

of the terrorists, and Maskhadov's ambiguous stance during the events in Moscow, it is my impression that he probably played an important role in the organization of the terrorist act and certainly intended to reap political benefits.

NOTES:

1 On 1 November 2002 Shamil Basaev took responsibility for the hostage-taking in a letter posted on the website of the radical fringe, kavkaz-tsentr. The webpage has been obstructed since then, but the text is available in the archives of Chechnya - Short List, <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/chechnya-sl/>>.

2 The memorandum of the SPS public commission for investigating the tragic events in Moscow on 23-26 October 2002 was published under the heading of: "What was it? Freeing hostages or liquidating terrorists?," Novaya gazeta, 21 November 2002.

3 Vyacheslav Izmailov, "Spetzprotection for the Terrorists," Novaya gazeta, 17 September 2001.

4 Zakaev was initially arrested in Denmark, which refused Russia's extradition request and released him. Zakaev then flew to London, where he was arrested again, as Russia appealed to British courts with the same charges that were found insufficient in Copenhagen. To my knowledge, the hostage-taking charge is false; I worked on that case also. I do not know of any instance where Zakaev was involved in hostage-taking. See also the interview with Father Phillip on the Memorial website, <www.memo.ru>.

5 Vyacheslav Izmailov, "Maskhadov's associates are a bigger threat to him than the Russian Security Services," Novaya gazeta, 11 November 2002.

6 See the archives on Chechnya - Short List, <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/chechnya-sl/>>.

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