

Moscow Attack a Test for Putin and His Record Against Terror

March 29, 2010

By **CLIFFORD J. LEVY**

MOSCOW — The brazen suicide bombings in the center of Moscow confronted Prime Minister [Vladimir V. Putin](#) with a grave challenge to his record of curbing terrorism, and raised the possibility that he would respond as he had in the past, by significantly tightening control over the government.

The explosions Monday, set off by female suicide bombers in two landmark subway stations, killed at least 38 people and wounded scores of others, touching off fears that the Muslim insurgency in southern Russia, including Chechnya, was once again being brought to the country's heart.

The attacks during the morning rush hour seemed all but designed to taunt the security services, which have been championed by Mr. Putin in the decade since he took power in Russia. The first one occurred at the Lubyanka subway station, next to the headquarters of the Federal Security Service, also known as the F.S.B., the successor agency to the Soviet-era K.G.B. that was led by Mr. Putin in the late 1990s.

Mr. Putin, the former president and still Russia's paramount leader, has built his reputation in part on his success in bottling up the Muslim insurgency in southern Russia and preventing major terrorist attacks in the country's population centers in recent years. If the bombings on Monday herald a renewed campaign by insurgents in major cities, then that legacy may be tarnished.

The attacks could also throw into doubt the policies of Mr. Putin's

protégé, President [Dmitri A. Medvedev](#), who has spoken in favor of liberalizing the government, increasing political pluralism and dealing with terrorism by addressing the root causes of the insurgency.

While Mr. Medvedev has not yet put in place many major changes, Mr. Putin has generally allowed him to pursue his course. More terrorism, though, could cause Mr. Putin to shove Mr. Medvedev aside and move the security-oriented circle of advisers around Mr. Putin to the forefront.

"Putin said, 'One thing that I definitely accomplished was this,' and he didn't," said [Pavel K. Baev](#), a Russian who is a professor at the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo.

"My feeling is this is not an isolated attack, that we will see more," Mr. Baev said. "If we are facing a situation where there is a chain of attacks, that would undercut every attempt to soften, liberalize, open up, and increase the demand for tougher measures."

Mr. Putin on Monday limited [his comments](#) largely to vows to destroy the terrorists who organized the attacks, who have not been identified, but who the Russian authorities said they suspect came from Chechnya or neighboring regions in the Caucasus Mountains. But when he last faced a spate of such violence, in 2004, he reacted with a sweeping reorganization of the government that he said would unite the country against terrorism, but also concentrated power in the Kremlin.

He pushed through laws that eliminated the direct election of regional governors, turning them into presidential appointees, and made it all but impossible for political independents to be elected to the federal Parliament. He also increased the strength of the security services.

Boris I. Makarenko, chairman of the [Center for Political Technologies](#) in Moscow, a research organization, cautioned that it was too soon to speculate whether Mr. Putin might feel the need to clamp down. Mr. Makarenko said he believed that Mr. Putin's reputation had not

suffered badly because of terrorist attacks early in his tenure as president.

But Mr. Makarenko noted that the bombings in the Moscow subway came as Russia's financial problems had been agitating the government. Protests have broken out in some major cities, and the opposition, while still relatively weak, has been gaining some support.

"The public has become more skeptical about the government in general in recent months, due to the government's limited ability to tackle the effects of the economic crisis, to the inefficiency and misbehavior of the police, and other issues," he said. "These terrorist attacks might be another piece in the efforts of those who want to go after the government."

The subway system in Moscow is one of the world's most extensive and well managed, and the bombings on Monday spread anxiety that is unlikely to dissipate for some time. For many people here, the day's events recalled the tense times in the early part of the last decade when the city, including the subway, was hit with several terrorist attacks.

While the Muslim insurgency has not subsided in recent years, major attacks outside the Caucasus region had been unusual, and in April 2009, the Kremlin even announced what it described as the [end of special counterterrorism operations](#) in Chechnya.

But in November 2009, terrorists [bombed a luxury passenger train](#) that was traveling in a rural area from Moscow to St. Petersburg, killing 26 people. Last month, a Chechen rebel leader, Doku Umarov, threatened in an interview on a Web site to organize terror acts in Russian population centers.

"If Russians think that the war is happening only on television, somewhere far off in the Caucasus, and it will not touch them, then we are going to show them that this war will return to their homes," he said.

Mr. Medvedev, who took office in 2008, has called for a somewhat different tack on the insurgency, saying that the government should aggressively hunt down the terrorists, but also focus on the poverty and government malfeasance that he contended nurtured extremism.

Last June, Mr. Medvedev visited the region and [gave an unusual speech](#) in which he seemed to offer an implicit rebuff to the uncompromising Putin strategy.

"It is no secret to anyone here that these problems in the North Caucasus, and in the south of our country in general, are systemic," Mr. Medvedev said. "By saying that, I am referring to the low living standards, high unemployment and massive, horrifyingly widespread corruption."

Mr. Medvedev also appointed a new leader of Ingushetia, a Muslim region, who echoed his belief that hard-line measures would only stir a backlash.

On Monday, though, some senior members of Mr. Putin's party, United Russia, were already suggesting that the government needed to adopt a stern new plan to combat terrorism.

Vladimir A. Vasilyev, chairman of the security committee in Parliament, lashed out at law-enforcement authorities, saying that they should be punished for allowing the attack.

"I am convinced that all those who failed to carry out their duty will bear responsibility," he said, adding that current laws were "ineffective."

For his part, [Mr. Medvedev voiced](#) only a determination to catch those behind the attacks. "We will continue our counterterrorist operations with unflinching resolve until we have defeated this scourge," he said.

Reporting was contributed by Ellen Barry, Andrew E. Kramer, Michael Schwartz and Yulia Taranova.