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Dagestan suicide bombings have Russia looking to Putin

The Dagestan suicide bombings on Wednesday were the latest in a spate of attacks that has many in Russia looking to Vladimir Putin, whose reputation was built on tough talk and action against insurgents.



Prime Minister Vladimir Putin heads the cabinet meeting at the Novo-Ogaryovo presidential residence outside Moscow. Putin said the Dagestan suicide bombings on Wednesday may have been organized by the same militants who attacked the Moscow subway.

(Alexei Nikolsky/RIA Novosti/AP)

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Moscow —

The Dagestan suicide bombings Wednesday were the latest in a spate of attacks inside Russia that have put intense pressure on powerful Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to preserve his legacy of bringing strength, security, and stability to Russia.

Experts are deeply divided over what options may be available to Mr. Putin, who as president championed a tough approach to the rebellious republic of Chechnya and also committed Russia to host the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, a city that sits on the very edge of the seething North Caucasus region.

Wednesday's double suicide bombing in Kizlyar, Dagestan, killed at least 12 people and wounded 23, mostly members of Russia's security forces, and focused attention on an insurgency that's been expanding, largely below the world's radar screen, on Russia's troubled southern flank for at least two years. Insurgents from the North Caucasus are suspected behind the pair of devastating strikes at two underground Metro stations in Moscow on Monday morning that killed 39 people.

IN PICTURES: Bombings in Russia

The explosive return of terrorism to Russia's political agenda "is a deep and personal challenge for Putin," says Nikolai Petrov, an analyst with the Carnegie Center in Moscow.

Putin came to power in 1999 amid a wave of terrorist apartment bombings that killed hundreds in Moscow and other Russian cities. He famously remarked that Russian forces would "wipe out the bandits in the outhouse" and oversaw a brutal pacification program against Chechen rebels that seemed to end with the Kremlin declaring victory last year.

"The whole myth of Putin is that he's very tough, very effective, and that his policies did bring peace and stability to the North Caucasus," says Mr. Petrov.

Violence returns, threatens Sochi Olympics

For nearly six years, Russia's heartland has been relatively free from the horrific terrorist attacks that characterized Putin's early years as president, though a deadly bombing on a Moscow-St. Petersburg train last November was read by some experts as a warning of things to come.

"With these prominent terrorist attacks, Putin will be under intense pressure to show that his strategy worked. It's all on him. He needs to take some action to restore an impression of stability in the North Caucasus," Petrov says.

Some experts say the terror attacks make explicit the threat to Sochi, where Putin has staked \$17 billion of the state's money and his own personal prestige on the upcoming Olympic Games.

"This is very alarming," says Olga Kryshtanovskaya, a leading Russian political scientist. "We're facing an enemy that wants to destabilize the situation for political purposes. Russia's prestige is at stake here. And if we can't cope with terrorists in our own capital city, how can we hope to prevent them from disrupting a big international event like the Olympics?"

Putin himself has taken center stage in recent days even though, under Russia's Constitution, national security should be the realm of President Dmitry Medvedev.

In a reprise of his "outhouse" comment, Putin told journalists on Tuesday that the militants will be "dredged from the bottom of the sewers."

Dagestan-Moscow link?

After the Dagestan bombings on Wednesday, Putin drew an explicit link with the Moscow terror strike, saying "I don't rule out that [both actions] were carried out by the same group." Dagestani leader Magomedislam Magomedov echoed that line, saying the Moscow and Kizlyar bombers were "links in the same chain."

Some experts believe Putin and Mr. Medvedev are engaged in an under-the-carpet struggle for control of the Kremlin in elections that are slated for 2012, and some suggest that swift action by Putin in the wake of the terror strikes may improve his chances

"If there are more terrorist acts, particularly in Moscow, we might even see emergency presidential elections," says Vladimir Pribylovsky, head of Panorama, an independent Moscow think tank. "There is growing public unease, and this could be used against Medvedev. People associate Putin with a firm hand, and this situation can play into his hands."

But no one is sure what options may be available to crush the insurgency that is spreading in the mainly-Muslim North Caucasus and now, once again, appears to threaten Russia's main population centers with random violence.

Speaking with journalists Tuesday, Putin admitted that there's little prospect of locking down Moscow's sprawling transportation system, which is used by upwards of 10 million people daily, including thousands of market vendors who routinely lug large packages on and off metro trains. But he called for increased use of surveillance equipment, such as security cameras, as has become common practice in London and other European capitals.

"We now know that these systems cannot prevent terror attacks, but they help law enforcement agencies identify helpers and organizers," he said. But neither he nor Medvedev have so far offered any hint of a fresh strategy.

Putin's chance to concentrate power

"We had a certain level of complacency in recent years, because of the relative peace in Russian cities, but it never stopped happening in the North Caucasus," says Viktor Mizin, deputy director of the official Institute of International Studies in Moscow. "Now we need urgent measures that combine military methods with economic development and political change. It's a very tall order, and there are clearly no quick fixes."

Following the last large-scale terrorist strike – the 2004 hostage crisis at a Beslan school that resulted in more than 300 deaths – then-president Putin forced through draconian political changes that strengthened the security forces, concentrated more power in the Kremlin, and canceled regional elections.

The current wave of terrorism might be similarly used to force through radical reforms of the Interior Ministry, which oversees Russia's police forces, and also to end a recent internal debate about the need to liberalize the Kremlin-centered, authoritarian political system that Putin established.

"This will probably end any talk of political reform for the time being," says Petrov. "They'll say 'we're in a war against terror, we can't afford the luxury of discussing this right now,' and so on."

'The aim of terrorists is to goad us'

But the Kremlin might also fear that launching a new crackdown against the insurgent groups in the North Caucasus could bring on fresh terrorist assaults against Moscow.

"Lately, special services have been very successful in assassinating chiefs of terrorist groups in the North Caucasus," says Alexei Mukhin, director of the independent Center for Political Information in Moscow. "The Moscow bombings can be read as a clear message to security services, which is: Stop killing our leaders, or we'll attack targets like the Moscow metro."

Some experts say that, whatever Russian leaders decide, they need to accept that the option of using force alone to stem a rising insurgency has not worked.

"The aim of the terrorists is to goad us into cracking down, changing our political system because we fear the threat from them," says Mr. Mizin of the Institute of International Studies. "It would be very good if President Medvedev gave a strong statement that, despite the sorrow we feel and our determination to fight, that we will not sacrifice the democracy we've been building or our standards of civilized conduct in the cause of fighting terror."