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Russia

Terrorist Attack in Moscow: When the government's response is more frightening than the terrorist attack itself

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On March 22, one of the worst terrorist attacks in the history of modern Russia was carried out in Moscow Crocus City Hall: several armed men stormed the building and shot a crowd of civilians at point-blank. As of 4 p.m. March 23, Russian authorities [reported](#) that 133 people were killed and more than 100 wounded. We extend our condolences to all the victims and their loved ones — innocent civilians should not become targets of political violence.

Despite numerous speculations about the involvement of Islamic fundamentalists, we still do not know for sure who the perpetrators were, nor who was behind the attack. However, some conclusions can already be drawn. First, the terrorist attack clearly took the Russian authorities by surprise. Only recently, Vladimir Putin called the warnings of Western intelligence agencies about possible terrorist attacks in Russian cities a “provocation.” With direct contact between the intelligence services of Russia and Western countries broken, and public warnings ignored by the Russian authorities for clearly political reasons (information about impending terrorist attacks was published shortly before the presidential election), the danger of further tragedies is growing. The Russian authorities expect their own citizens to pay the price for the government's conspiratorial view of the world and mistrust of any foreign intelligence.

Second, the capacity of the Russian state is again in question. It was first severely challenged six months ago during [Prigozhin's mutiny](#). It turned out that the most powerful special services in a city packed with video cameras were not only unable to prevent this heinous crime, but were barely able to catch its perpetrators. Symptomatically, the day before the attack, the Russian financial watchdog Rosfinmonitoring [added](#) the non-existent “international LGBT public movement” to its list of “terrorists and extremists.” When the fight against imaginary enemies takes precedence, it is all too easy to overlook the real threat.

Third, the Russian state, as always, will try to profit from this situation, and this is why the state's reaction can be more frightening than the terrorist attack itself. State Duma deputies, pro-war Z-bloggers, and the former president of Russia Dmitri Medvedev are already demanding to lift the moratorium on the death penalty for terrorists (whom, it should be recalled, the Russian state also calls peaceful opponents of the regime, including [Boris Kagarlitsky](#)). Vladimir Putin is in no hurry to recognize the involvement of Islamicists in the terrorist attack, but he has already detected a “Ukrainian trace.” There is no doubt that the terrorist attack will be used to justify further crackdowns, the adoption of new repressive laws, the escalation of violence in Ukraine and, possibly, a new wave of mobilization.

This terrorist attack is not the first of its kind: we can recall the apartment bombings of 1999 or the Beslan school siege in 2004. Yet there is an important difference: the unprecedented degree of violence into which Russian society has been plunged with the war in Ukraine. The media have already reported that the alleged perpetrator of the terrorist attack had his [ear cut off](#) by Russian security forces and was forced to eat it. Right-wingers of all stripes have already started using anti-migrant and Islamophobic rhetoric in the context of the terrorist attack. Can the Russian regime, which opened a Pandora's box of unprecedented violence when it launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, keep it under control? Given the inability of the security services to prevent the terrorist attack, there is great reason to doubt it.

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