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Putin's policies fail the test, so schoolchildren suffer

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As we write, the excruciating standoff continues in Russia's southern region, where Chechen terrorists are holding more than 120 children hostage. Russia has had a week of tragedy: two planes blown out of the sky, and a suicide bomber in downtown Moscow. But Chechnya has had a decade of catastrophe with both rebels and federal authorities engaging in human-rights abuses.

Regardless of how President Vladimir Putin and Russia's security services resolve this immediate, agonizing crisis, sooner or later they must face the larger failure of their Chechnya policies: Instead of containing extremism, they have bred terrorists. When that day comes, they should realize that there is more support amid the Russian public for drawing down the conflict than might be expected -- and that there are important reasons to choose a more moderate approach rather than further escalation.

Why do we say this? Because we asked thousands of Russians how they felt about the war in seven surveys conducted between October, 2001, and July, 2004, and in several focus groups in summer 2002 and summer 2004.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the Kremlin's actions in Chechnya have had little public support for years. About 5 per cent of the respondents we surveyed across Russia in July supported the status quo of continued war. This number hasn't changed significantly -- even after such crises as the Moscow theatre hostage tragedy of October, 2002.

Until this summer, we've found Russian opinions roughly split in what policy course they advocated in Chechnya, between intensifying military action and some combination of ceasefire or withdrawal. Our most recent data, however, reveal a drop in support for intensifying the military response. We have seen a steady drop from a high of 39 per cent in October, 2001, down to 28 per cent in July. While the number of people who do not know what is the best course has held constant at 17 per cent, it's striking that the number of those supporting a ceasefire or withdrawal has steadily increased, from a low of 37 per cent (again from October, 2001) to this summer's high of 50 per cent.

In other words, if Mr. Putin chooses to decrease military force in the war -- unlikely as this seems in the current crisis -- we believe that in the not too distant future the public would support him.

Russians see only controlled media coverage of the war, yet they seem to be hearing about it from other sources. Our surveys in 2002 and 2003 suggested that about half of respondents knew someone who had served in Chechnya, and about 18 per cent knew someone who had been killed. In one of the recent focus groups, a participant began to weep as the moderator asked general questions about the effect of the war on residents in a town about three hours from Moscow; she had lost a close friend in Chechnya.

The war is rarely discussed officially, yet Russians appear all too aware of its costs in Russian blood and resources. In all our surveys, roughly two-thirds of the respondents chose "alarm at the losses of Russian troops" as by far the most common response. About 27 per cent said they felt "shame at the battlefield failures of our troops" and about 24 per cent "alarm at the economic cost of the war."

The crisis at Beslan's Middle School No. 1 is sure to prompt some in the Kremlin to call for more force; it may prompt the world community to write Mr. Putin a blank cheque. This would be unwise.

Our 2003 surveys asked Russian respondents how they feel toward nine different ethnic, religious, or national groups. Overall, 48 per cent view Chechens with either hostility or fear. In comparison, 16 per cent view Muslims and 13 per cent view Americans this way. Finally, in response to questions we asked subsets of respondents in our 2003 and 2004 regional surveys, a startling 45 per cent said they view minorities from the Caucasus with "much more" or "somewhat more" suspicion due to the war, and 28 per cent agreed with the statement that "the life of a Russian is worth more than the life of a Chechen." These data are based on smaller samples, and shouldn't be treated as definitive, but they confirm our impression that the war has fuelled ethnic hostility -- a growing scourge of Russian society.

Mr. Putin must make a terrible choice in the coming weeks. Let's hope he chooses -- and the international community encourages him to choose -- on the side of those who would draw down this conflict. Or there's no telling where this will end.

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