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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Stop Blaming Putin and Start Helping Him

By FIONA HILL

Moscow — On Monday, against the backdrop of the terrorist attack in Beslan, President Vladimir Putin of Russia held a remarkable four-hour discussion with a small group of American and Western European journalists and analysts at his official residence at Novo-Ogaryovo, outside Moscow. The meeting had been scheduled as part of a two-day conference on Russian-Western relations, but given the unfolding horrors at School No. 1, we were certain it would be canceled. Instead, President Putin turned it into a very personal exercise in public diplomacy.

Why did he meet with a group of foreigners at this critical juncture? Clearly, he was sending a message that he needs the United States and Europe to pay careful attention as he responds to the massacre. More specifically, he was saying three things: first, the situation in the North Caucasus is no longer just about Chechnya but involves dozens of potential ethnic and religious conflicts across the region; second, the West must stop simply criticizing me for the war in Chechnya without offering me any realistic solutions; and third, some things you are doing are making it much more difficult for me to resolve the situation.

Mr. Putin made a point of reminding us that the North Ossetia region, in which Beslan lies, was wracked by conflict between ethnic Ossetians and Ingush in the early 1990's. Now, with reports that Ingush have been identified among the terrorists, President Putin is taking great pains to stress the international dimensions of this particular attack and to play down the role of Ingush as well as Chechens (in fact, in his nationally televised speech on Saturday he did not mention Chechnya at all).

In spite of repeated Chechen terrorist attacks in Russia over the last five years, Mr. Putin has managed to prevent a general anti-Chechen and anti-Muslim backlash. Some suspected that the sheer depravity of the Beslan attack would demand a new approach. Yet Mr. Putin continues to stress his view that this was an act with many different perpetrators, initiated by Islamist terrorist groups outside Russia, thus hoping to head off reprisals against Ingush, Chechens and other Muslims.

President Putin told us that he was prepared to offer a great deal of autonomy to Chechnya, even to the point of "violating the Russian Constitution." This is something that he has resisted for some time, despite heavy pressure from some of his advisers and international opinion. He also said he would "broaden the political dialogue" by reaching

out to more groups and political leaders in Chechnya, in part by holding new parliamentary elections there.

He pointedly praised the Chechens for past loyalty to the state, accepted Russia's blame for historical injustices visited upon them and, in a notable break with earlier statements, admitted to "mistakes" Russia made in launching the first war against Chechnya in 1994. But he emphasized that the war has been exploited by Islamist radicals and international terrorists. He made it clear he still thinks he can resolve Russia's problems with Chechnya - but not if the West keeps talking about Chechen independence.

Repeatedly, Mr. Putin said that he wants the Chechens to have a constructive relationship with Russia. But the window of opportunity may be closing. Many Russians are publicly calling for an "Israeli approach" in response to the Beslan horror - that is, walling the Chechens in. Mr. Putin is feeling the heat: in our meeting, he said that an overhaul of law enforcement in the region might involve measures to prevent Chechens from leaving the territory. If the terrorist acts continue, the Russian political environment will harden even further. Very soon the president may not even be able to mention the more enlightened policies he outlined, let alone enact them.

So, can he put his words at Novo-Ogaryovo into action? Perhaps, but only with Western help. He took an extraordinary step in holding this meeting, and we have to show we are listening. This would entail three major steps.

First, Western leaders should reassure Mr. Putin that they do not expect Chechen independence to be on the table. And they should underscore that nobody is pushing him to negotiate or - as he put it - "deal with people who kill children."

Second, we must realize that pushing the Russian government to negotiate directly with the former Chechen president, Aslan Maskhadov, is counterproductive. Like Yasir Arafat, Mr. Maskhadov remains a potent symbol of his people's struggle and is the face most familiar to the rest of the world. But he is not the only political force in the region, and his ineffective tenure as president before the Russian re-invasion in 1999 showed that he is not the man to unify a broader group of Chechens. There are many factions and individuals within Chechnya itself and elsewhere in Russia whom President Putin should bring into the political process, if we can help him devise a face-saving exit for Mr. Maskhadov.

Third, we should offer to share intelligence with the Russians to help them discern the links between the Beslan terrorists and others operating in Europe; the British, Germans, French, Italians, Spaniards and Turks are already keeping tabs on these groups and probably know of connections with Chechnya. We could also offer Russian troops and police opportunities to train alongside their European counterparts on border security and antiterrorism strategies.

Time is running out for President Putin in the North Caucasus. We can't stop the clock, but we can at least give him a little more room to maneuver.

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