Waiting for the next Beslan – Russia's handling of major hostage-takings

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8 August 2007

FFI-rapport 2007/01888

1010

ISBN 978-82-464-1254-2

Keywords

Russland

Spesialoperasjoner

Terrorisme

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Sammendrag

Denne studien omhandler Russlands håndtering av fire store gisselaksjoner: Budennovsk (1995), Kizliar/Pervomaiskoe (1996), Dubrovka (2002) og Beslan (2004). I analysen diskuteres det i hvor stor grad håndteringen av disse aksjonene ble bedre som en følge av organisasjonsmessig læring og reform, og det blir redegjort for hvilke hindringer som synes å ha ligget i veien for slik læring og reform. Fokuset ligger i første rekke på hvordan håndteringen har fungert på det operasjonelle nivå, men i siste kapittel foretas en kortfattet gjennomgang av forskjellige taktiske aspekter ved operasjonene.

Studiens hovedkonklusjon er at det er lite å se av forbedring i håndteringen fra den ene aksjonen til den neste. Både organisasjonsmessig læring og reform ser ut til å ha funnet sted i veldig begrenset grad, og de tiltak som har blitt gjennomført har ofte vært av mer kosmetisk karakter. De viktigste årsakene til håndteringsproblemene synes å være manglende respekt for vedtatte prosedyrer og regler, embetsmenns og politikeres ønske om å beskytte seg selv mot anklager om skyld i etterkant, og sterk misstillit mellom de forskjellige sikkerhetsstrukturene. Denne typen problemer har også blitt rapportert fra andre land som har opplevd lignende situasjoner, men det kan virke som om de er ekstra utbredt i Russland. I tillegg ser det ut til at demokratiets stadig trangere kår i Russland gjør reell organisasjonsmessig læring og reform enda mindre sannsynlig.

Studien ble foretatt ut i fra en ide om at mer kunnskap om Russlands håndtering av disse hendelsene ville være av interesse, både fordi det var store spektakulære hendelser med enorm medieoppmerksomhet, og fordi slik kunnskap kan være av nytte for de som planlegger beredskap mot slike hendelser i andre land. Studien burde også være relevant i forbindelse med at NATO og Russland i NATO-Russland rådet diskuterer muligheten for at man i fremtiden kan komme til å deployere styrker sammen til lignende situasjoner. I *NATO-Russia Action Plan on Terrorism* sies det eksplisitt at partene er ”determined to improve the capability of our armed forces to work together in combatting the terrorist threat”.[1]

[1] *NATO-Russia Action Plan on Terrorism* at http://www.nato.int/docu/basictxt/b041209a-e.htm

English summary

This paper discusses how Russian authorities have handled four large-scale hostage-takings: Budennovsk (1995), Kizliar/Pervomaiskoe (1996), Dubrovka (2002) and Beslan (2004). The analysis examines to what extent handling of such events has improved through organizational learning and reform, and identifies obstacles to such learning and reform in the Russian context. The main analysis focuses on handling at the operational level, but in the last chapter a summary of important aspects of the tactical handling of the cases is provided.

The main conclusion of the study is that only very limited improvement can be seen. Both learning and reform seems only to a small extent to have taken place, and the efforts that have been made have often been of a rather cosmetic character. Major reasons for this are the disregard for formal offices and procedures, the self-interest of bureaucrats and security officials and institutional distrust. Similar causes to problems of handling major terrorist incidents can also be traced in other countries, but seem in particular acute in the Russian case. In addition, the regress in democratic development in Russia seems to have been a further impediment to the already difficult processes of organizational learning and reform.

The study is motivated by a conviction that an analysis of the Russian decision making in relation to these events should be of interest, both to better understand past events of great importance, and to provide insights for preparations against potential similar events in other countries. The study should also be of relevance to current debates about possible future joint Russian-Western handling of terrorist incidents. The NATO-Russia Council's NATO-Russia Action Plan on Terrorism explicitly states both that the parties should "exchange information and compare lessons learned from responses to terrorist attacks", and that they are "determined to improve the capability of our armed forces to work together in combating the terrorist threat".[2]

[2] *NATO-Russia Action Plan on Terrorism* at http://www.nato.int/docu/basictxt/b041209a-e.htm

Contents

1 Introduction

The 2004 Beslan hostage crisis shook not only Russia but also the world. Over one thousand hostages were taken – mostly women and children. When the severe fighting between Russian forces and the hostage takers was over, 344 were left dead and many more were wounded. In Russia, Beslan was the fourth major hostage-taking by Chechen terrorists since the early 1990s. It started with the taking of more than 1800 hostages at a hospital in the southern Russian town of Budennovsk in 1995. The Budennovsk scenario was repeated in another southern Russian town, Kizliar, in 1996, and in 2002, 912 people were taken hostage in the Dubrovka theatre, in the centre of Moscow.

Although Russia recently has suffered more from this kind of terrorism than most other countries, large scale hostage-takings are also seen elsewhere. Examples outside Russia include among others: the 66 American diplomats and embassy employees taken hostage by Iranian radicals in Iran in 1979, the several hundred people taken hostage by the Tupac Amaru guerrilla in the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima, Peru, in 1996, and the 300 members of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Sierra Leone taken hostage by the Revolutionary United Front in 2000. The danger of future similar incidents is therefore international. Video material found in Afghanistan shows how al-Qaeda recruits were trained in attacking public buildings with the purpose of taking large number of civilian hostages,[3] and in a widely read jihadist training manual written in 2004 by the prominent Saudi militant Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin, there is an entire chapter on hostage takings. Al-Muqrin in the manual recommends such operations, saying they could be used for at least five purposes: "1) to obtain concessions from the government, 2) to cause a political crisis between the local government and the hostages' home states, 3) to obtain information from a hostage, 4) to get money [...], and 5) to shed light on a particular issue [...]".[4] Al-Muqrin, as the leader of "al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula" in the first half of 2004, coordinated an attempted large-scale hostage-taking in the Eastern Saudi city of Khobar on 29 May 2004.

This study will investigate and analyse how Russian authorities have dealt with the four incidents occurring on its territory since the fall of communism, with a particular focus on the two problems of organizational reform and interagency cooperation. These problems have, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, been hotly debated, both among practitioners, politicians and academics in many countries. The report aims to make a contribution to this debate on two levels. First, by providing new empirical analysis on the problems of interagency coordination and cooperation during a crisis, and also on the problems of initiating organizational change in order to do better

[3] Bryan Preston, 'Guest Comment: Inside Al Qaeda's Training Camps - What they're ready for', The National Review (Oktober 2002) at http://www.nationalreview.com/script/printpage.p?ref=/comment/comment-preston100102.asp

[4] See Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin, *'ulum 'askariyya* [Military Science], 2004, pp. 55-60 (last accessed on www.qa3edoon.com on 11 June 2007).

next time. Such insights might be interesting in themselves, and they make available new evidence for comparative research. Second, the report questions a relatively common assumption in organization theory about external shocks as catalysts for organizational change.[5] The main conclusion is that at least under the conditions of limited democracy, the validity of the external shock hypothesis is doubtful.

The paper starts with a brief summary of the chain of events in each of the four incidents. Then the problems of operational leadership are discussed and analysed with the help of three independent variables: (1) the status of formal offices and procedures; (2) fear of responsibility; and (3) institutional distrust. This discussion is followed by a short exploration of the organizational learning and reform that can be identified in the aftermath of the crises. The conclusion draws together the main arguments of the paper and points out why the topic is relevant also for other countries than Russia. After the conclusion there is an appendix that summarises the main operational and tactical lessons from these four cases that might be of relevance also to other countries than Russia.

2 Major hostage-takings in Russia since 1995

2.1 Budennovsk

On 14 June 1995, 195 rebels dressed in Russian army uniforms stormed the southern Russian town of Budennovsk (population app. 60 000). After some small initial skirmishes with local police, the rebels took more than 1800 hostages at the local hospital. The hostages included both patients from the hospital and local citizens rounded up on the streets, in shops, and in private homes. The rebels, led by Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev, demanded a cease-fire in Chechnya and withdrawal of all Russian forces from the break-away republic.

The first storm of the hospital by Russian security forces started at 5 am on 17 June. First Deputy Interior Minister Mikhail Yegorov took the decision to storm the hospital. The storm liberated parts of the premises of the school and freed about 100 hostages, but did not bring an end to the crisis. At about 3 pm on the same day a second storm followed, without substantially changing the situation. The fighting between Chechen rebels and Russian forces left 129 people dead and more than 400 wounded. After the second storm negotiations were initiated by then Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. Chernomyrdin promised the rebels that Russian forces would halt military operations in Chechnya, and that the rebels would be allowed safe retreat back to Chechnya. The Budennovsk raid initiated the process that led to the end of the first Chechen war.

[5] On this, see for example Walter W. Powell, "Expanding the Scope of Institutional Analysis" in Walter W. Powell and Paul J. Di Maggio, 1991, *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p.197.

This hostage-taking has later come to be seen as an act of desperation on the part of the Chechen resistance, and not as a carefully planned attack. Sergei Stepashin, in 1995 head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), said at the 10-year anniversary of Budennovsk that the rebels had originally planned to seize an airplane in the town of Mineralnye Vody.[6] Still, the rebel Chechen-press information agency at the same anniversary called the Budennovsk raid a successful undertaking that made the Russian authorities "listen to the Chechen resistance and start the process of peaceful resolution of the Russian-Chechen war of 1994-1996".[7]

Russian military and security forces have later interpreted what happened at Budennovsk as a stab in their back by the politicians, in particular Chernomyrdin. The military and security forces are of the conviction that they at the time were running a successful campaign in Chechnya against the rebels, and that if Chernomyrdin had not given in to rebel demands, the military could have ended the Chechen conflict successfully by military means.[8]

2.2 Kizliar and Pervomaiskoe

Approximately half a year later, Budennovsk was repeated. On 9 January 1996 a group of between 200 and 250 rebels, under the leadership of Chechen warlord Salman Raduev, started to attack, first Russian armed formations, and shortly after local civilians and the hospital in the city of Kizliar (pop. 45 000) in Daghestan in the North Caucasus. About 24 civilians were killed in the initial fighting. Exact figures vary, but somewhere in the excess of 2000 people were then taken hostage in the hospital. This time, however, negotiations at the local level quickly led to a settlement of the crisis. The rebels were promised a safe passage back to Chechnya, and allowed to take a small number of hostages with them (about 120). The hostages were to be released as soon as the border between Daghestan and Chechnya had been crossed. In the early morning of 10 January the rebels together with the remaining hostages left Kizliar. However, after having reached only a few hundred meters into Chechnya, the convoy of 11 busses came under fire from Russian military helicopters. The rebels set the convoy in retreat, and on the way back they also took 34 Siberian OMON soldiers from the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) that guarded the border as hostages.[9] The OMON soldiers had been ordered to let the convoy reach Chechnya unharmed. It appears that the MVD intended to act in accordance with the negotiated agreement, whereas the Ministry of Defence (MOD) which controlled the helicopters did not.

The rebels led the convoy of busses to the nearby village of Pervomaiskoe. This village had a population of 920 people. In addition, a similar number of refugees from the war in Chechnya also lived in the village. An unidentified number of these had left the village before the rebel convoy came, but many also remained and in reality became additional hostages.
The rebels barricaded themselves in the village, and the village was surrounded from the outside by a mix of FSB, MVD and MOD troops. For five days there was a standoff between the rebels

[6] "Tenth Anniversary of Budennovsk raid observed", *Chechnya Weekly,* Vol.6, Issue 23, 16 June 2005.
[7] Ibid.
[8] For more on this, see Vladimir Mukhin, "The results of the taking of Budennovsk by terrorists under the leadership of Shamil Basayev", *Nezavisimaia Gazeta,* 26 December 1996.
[9] OMON are special purpose police units used for high risk operations.

and the federal forces, during which the federal forces continued to assemble troops and hardware. Then, in the early morning of January 15, the federal forces attacked the village from all sides. Director of the FSB, Mikhail Barsukov, gave the order to storm, on the grounds that the rebels had begun to execute hostages. The official investigating commission later disconfirmed this claim. The fighting continued for three days, until the remaining rebels managed to break the blockade and enter Chechnya in the night between 17 and 18 January. They brought with them 64 hostages, who were released a month later. A total of 78 hostages were killed during the operations in Kizliar and Pervomaiskoe.[10]

The Pervomaiskoe operation was unique among the cases studied here in the use of heavy firepower, and it also became a low point in demonstrated un-ability to cooperate between the power agencies.

2.3 Dubrovka

At 9 pm in the evening of 23 October 2002, between 40 and 50 terrorists stormed the House of Culture at Dubrovka in central Moscow, where the popular musical *Nord-Ost* was playing. In total 979 people were take hostage in the operation, led by Chechen warlord Movsar Baraev. One thing that distinguished this hostage-taking from previous ones was that almost half of the hostage-takers were women.

The hostage-takers initially released a small number of hostages, and then presented the by now traditional demand that all Russian federal forces be withdrawn from Chechnya. They further demanded that this should take place within a week. If not, the rebels would blow up the whole theatre with themselves and all the hostages.

Several attempts were made at negotiations, both by Chechens and others, but no break-through was achieved. After close to three days of siege, Russian special operations forces stormed the theatre in the early hours of Saturday 26 October. Before the special operations forces started their assault, a paralytic gas had been pumped into the building for about 30 minutes. The gas caused the majority of hostages as well as many of the hostage takers to faint. The special operations forces killed the remaining conscious hostage-takers, mostly those who had not been in the main assembly room.

The hostage-takers at different times during the siege released about 200 hostages, mostly women, children and Muslims. The total number of dead hostages after the storm was 129, of which 127 died due to harmful effects of the gas. It seems that because of lack of communication between the special operations forces and Moscow medical personnel, the latter were not issued with the right kinds of medication to help those who were the most affected by the gas. Also, the operational staff had vastly underestimated the need for ambulances.

[10] ”10 let terrora” (Ten years of terror), in *Gazeta,* 3 September 2004.

Despite the loss of 129 hostages, the storming of the Dubrovka theatre came to be seen as a success, also among the Russian population. In a survey carried out by the Levada Centre three days after the storming, 82 % of the respondents said they were either positive or very positive to the way the special operations forces had acted.[11] According to one source, there was a widespread opinion among FSB personnel that what they saw as their own triumphant handling of the Dubrovka crisis would deter the Chechens from further major hostage-takings.[12] After Budennovsk it had become an established fact among the Security Services that the negotiated settlement there had paved the way for the raid on Kizliar and Pervomaiskoe. Now, however, the Chechens had learned what Russian federal forces were capable of, and they would therefore not try something similar again. This illusion was allowed to live for two years, until September 2004.

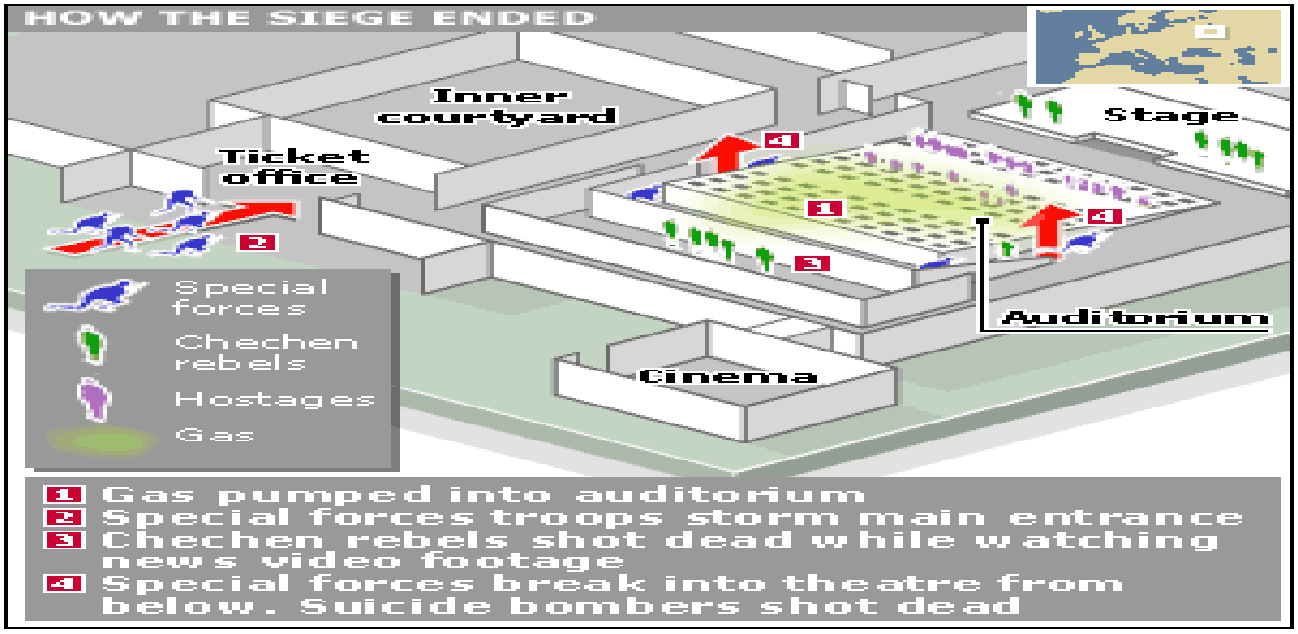

Figure 2.1 Skech of the theatre of operation during the Dubrovka siege (source: BBC at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2371691.stm, accessed 14 February 2007)

2.4 Beslan

On 1 September 2004, the first day of the school year, a group of about 32 terrorists, led by Chechen warlord Ruslan Khochubarov, stormed school no.1 at Beslan (pop. 35 000) in North Ossetia in southern Russia, taking more than 1300 hostages. The main demand was again withdrawal of all Russian forces from Chechnya, and also recognition of Chechnya as an independent state within the Commonwealth of Independent States. Negotiations were carried out by a number of people, including the paediatrician Leonid Roshal and former President of Ingushetia, Ruslan Aushev. The negotiations were largely unfruitful, but in the afternoon of the

[11] http:www.levada.ru/press/2002102900.html
[12] Andrei Soldatov, "Ot pobedy do Beslana" (From Victory to Beslan), *Moskovskie Novosti,* 22 October 2004.

second day of the crisis Aushev convinced the terrorists to let 26 nursing women and their infants leave the school.

At about 1 pm on the third day of the siege two large explosions were heard. Panic broke out among the hostages, and they began to flee the school with the terrorists shooting at them. About half an hour later the storm of the school started. There are conflicting accounts of what caused the two explosions that set events in motion. Some claim that the hostage taker controlling the bombs in the school gym was shot by a Russian sniper. Others claim that they fell by accident.

The storm was heavy, with helicopter gun-ships in the air and the use of tanks. A still contentious issue is whether flame-throwers were used or not. An additional controversy is whether the tanks fired at the school while there were still hostages inside. The official version is that the use of tanks only started at approximately 3 pm, when there were only terrorists left in the building, but other accounts tell of tanks firing at the school almost from the beginning of the fight. The fighting continued until the evening of 3 September. The end result was 31 out of 32 hostage takers dead, and 331 hostages dead and many more wounded. Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev claimed responsibility for the raid about 14 days later.

Even in Russia, the handling of Beslan tragedy could hardly be presented as a success story in the way Dubrovka had been. Still, the official investigative commission in general concluded that the federal forces had done as good a job as could be expected given the circumstances. However, in a public opinion poll, conducted about 14 days after the incident, only 34 % said they though the operation to free hostages had been handled well or in general handled well, whereas 61 % said it had not been handled well. It is also interesting to note that only 19 % thought the authorities should have given in to the terrorists' demands in order to free hostages.[13]

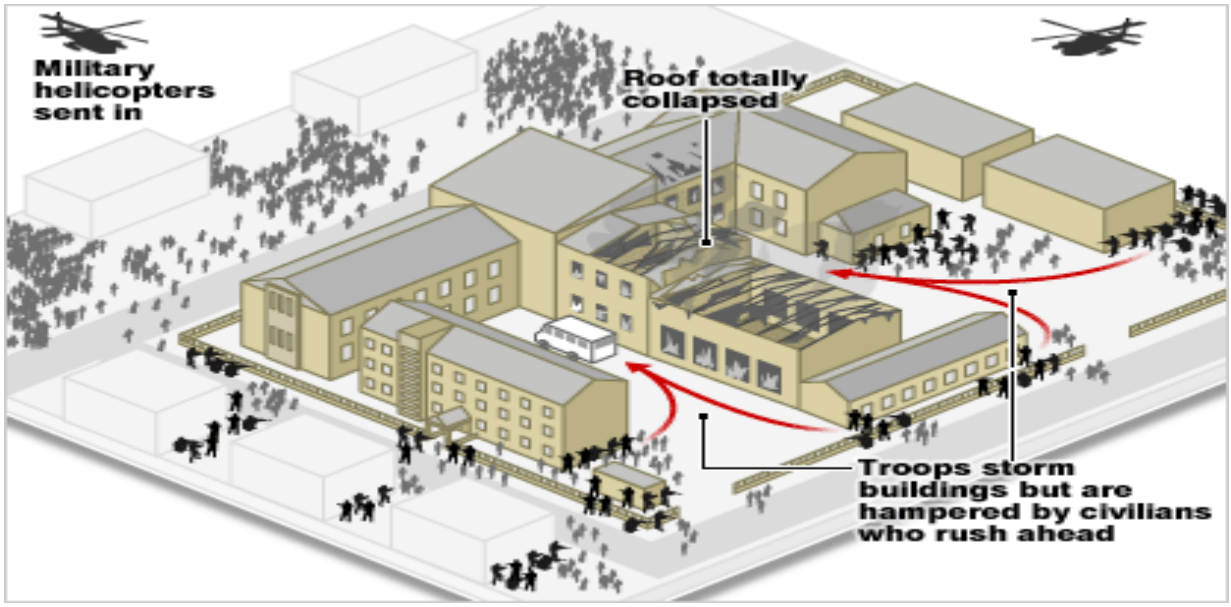

Figure 2.2 Source: BBC, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/world/04/russian_s/html/4.stm, accessed 14 February 2007.

[13] http://www.levada.ru/press/2004091501.html

In figure 1.3, numbers should be taken with care, they are mostly official estimates, cross-referenced with estimates from independent sources.

	Number of hostages	How long before use of force	Types of force used	Number of causalities	Number of rebels	Key federal decision makers
Budennovsk – 95	1800	third day	Special forces	166 dead 400 wounded	195	Yegorov, Stepashin, Cernomyrdin, Yerin, Kulikov
Pervomaiskoe – 96	2000 in Kizliar, 60 + villagers at Pervomaiskoe	fifth day	Tanks, helicopter gun-ships, mortars	78 dead, number of wounded unknown	300	Kulikov, Barsukov, Mikhailov, Ovchinnikov
Dubrovka – 02	979	third day	Gas and special forces	129 dead, more than 700 wounded	40-50	Pronichev
Beslan – 04	1128	third day	Helicopter gun-ships, tanks, (flame throwers)	331 dead, between 700 and 800 wounded	32	Andreev, Dzaoskhov, Pronichev, Anisimov, Aushev

Figure 2.3 Central data for the four operations compared

3 On Crisis Management

Even in Russia it is not particularly controversial to state that the leadership of the operations under scrutiny in this paper was chaotic, and that this had a negative impact on the handling of the crises. Also President Putin partly acknowledged this fact when he said in connection with the Beslan crisis that "it happens that there are a lot of generals, and then they tend to disturb one another".[14] Retired General I. N. Vorobyov and Professor V.A. Kiselev wrote in the aftermath in the official MOD journal *Military Thought* that in all the Russian hostage-takings "the principal problem was the lack of coordination between various agencies, and the absence of a single command and control centre for all forces employed". Deputy Commander of the Russian Army, General Moltenskoi, together with two colleagues, state in the same journal that the "absence of systematic organization" is one of the main reasons for the state's weak ability to deal with terror incidents.[15]

[14] Pavel Magaev and Nino Balakhashvili, "Putin: it happens that there are a lot of generals, and then they tend to disturb one another", *Novaia Gazeta,* 15 september 2005.

[15] V.I. Moltenskoi, Iu, A. Martseniuk and S.G. Chekisov, "Slovo Iubiliaram. Ob organizatsii antiterroristicheskoi deiatelnosti gosudarstvo" (A word to those who celebrate: On the organization of the state's anti-terror activities), *Voennaia Mysl,* No.1, January 2005, p.23, and I.N. Vorobyov and V.A. Kiselev, "The Armed Conflict: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorist Operations", *Military Thought,* No.1, March 2006, p. 27.

Logically, operational and political leadership in a crisis, and cooperation and coordination among implementing agencies are distinct processes. The first is vertical, from principal to agent; the second is horizontal, taking place between agencies at the same level of authority.[16] However, in practice, and in particular in the cases discussed here, these are largely overlapping processes. Boin, `t Hart, Stern and Sundelius, for example, claim that "successful crisis management depends not so much on critical decision making [on the part of the political leadership] but on the facilitation of crisis implementation and coordination throughout the response network".[17]

In her study of cooperation and coordination failure among US intelligence agencies before and after 9/11, Amy B. Zegart attributes failures to three factors: characteristics of the political system/regime, the self-interest of politicians and government bureaucrats, and the nature of bureaucratic organizations.[18] Although this model was developed explicitly to explain US policy outcomes, the findings in this study suggest a broader relevance for these variables in explaining failure and weakness of interagency cooperation in high pressure situations. The three independent variables listed in this paper: status of formal offices and procedures, fear of responsibility, and institutional distrust are similar to Zegat's. The status of formal offices and procedures is a central feature of the Russian political system/regime, fear of responsibility is intimately connected to the self-interest of politicians and bureaucrats and might also be a part of the political culture, and institutional distrust is a significant component of the nature of bureaucratic organizations almost anywhere.

I will investigate to what extent the three independent variables explain decision output, and to what extent repeated exposure to similar situations has resulted in learning that has reduced the impact of these variables. It should be noted that Zegart is not very optimistic with regard to organizational learning in the case of the USA, "it appears that the nature of organizations, rational self-interest, and the fragmented federal government hinder adaptation even after catastrophic failure".[19]

3.1 Status of formal offices and procedures

There is in principle never any doubt about the final political responsibility for the handling of the type of national crisis situations discussed here. That responsibility rests with the head of state, in this case the Russian president. He, however, is rarely himself directly in charge of the operations but delegates that to someone else. Until 2003 Russian regulations stipulated that organizational leadership in case of terror incidents was the responsibility of the FSB, and that therefore the

[16] Except in the cases where laws and/or regulations stipulate the subordination of one or more angenices to one or more agencies in crisis situations.
[17] Arjen Boin, Paul `t Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius, 2005, *The Politics of Crisis Management – Public Leadership under Pressure,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.43.
[18] Zegart's last factor is in her article called "the fragmentet structure of federal government" because her model aims only to explain the US system. However, the fragmentet structure of federal government is a characteristic of the political system, and for the purpose of this study that fits better. See, Amy B. Zegart, "September 11 and the Adaptation Failure of U.S. Intelligence Agencies", *International Security,* Vol. 29, No.4 (Spring 2005), pp. 78-111.
[19] Ibid. p.107.

person in charge should be the head of the FSB. Thus, for most of the period discussed in this paper, leadership in the case of terrorist incidents lay squarely with the FSB.

In addition, the 1998 law "On the war on terrorism" gave the following agencies responsibility for responding to terrorist incidents in a subordinate position to the FSB: the Interior Ministry (MVD), the Foreign Intelligence service (SVR), the Federal Service of Protection (FSO), and the Defence Ministry (MOD). The leading role of the FSB was natural because the post-Soviet anti-terror branch of the FSB is a direct successor to the anti-terror section within the fifth department of the KGB. If an incident took place outside Moscow, the head of the local FSB branch should automatically be the person in charge at the local level.

In July 2003, however, the MVD was given a status almost equal to the FSB in the fight against terrorism. In particular, anti-terrorism responsibility was transferred to the MVD in the Southern *Okrug*. This is where three out of the four incidents studied here have taken place. Under the new arrangements the MVD was tasked with establishing under its leadership so called Groups of Operational Control (Gruppa Operativnogo Upravleniia – GrOU). These groups should include, in addition to MVD militarised structures, also forces from other agencies including the Armed forces. Some, however, claim that the GrOUs, although formally led by the MVD, were in reality still under FSB control.[20] This system lasted for three years, until it was revised again in March 2006, when the FSB regained also the formal primary responsibility. According to the 2006 regulations, the regional chief of the FSB should serve as head of the crisis headquarters.[21] Therefore, throughout the period under discussion, there have been relatively clear regulations with regard to which agency should have the main responsibility in cases of terror attacks. That fact, however, was not enough to ensure rapid and unambiguous leadership in the four operations mentioned above.

In *Budennovsk,* the operation was lead first by Interior Minister Viktor Yerin, and later by his deputy Mikhail Yegorov. The head of FSB, Sergei Stepashin, who by existing regulations should have led the operation, was relegated to deputy. Two days into the operation, however, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin suddenly decided to take over the operation himself, and run the show from Moscow. This decision was met with disbelief by both the FSB and MVD.

In *Kizliar* and *Pervomaiskoe* the MVD was again at first in charge, this time by Deputy Minister of the Interior, Pavel Golubets. Head of the FSB, Mikhail Barsukov, however, led the battle of *Pervomaiskoe*. Also *Dubrovka* was led by the FSB, this time by Deputy Director of the FSB, Vladimir Pronichev. At *Beslan* the new GrOU structure was in place, but the local GrOU head was totally sidelined and the operation was at direct order from Moscow led by the head of the local branch of the FSB, Valerii Andreev. It can also be added that at the rebel raid on *Nalchik,* the capital of Kabardino-Balkharia, in October 2005 , the operation was, in confirmation with regulations, led by the head of the local GrOU, but only for the first four hours. After that central

[20] Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, "Sily bystrogo reformirovaniia" (Rapid Reorgaization Forces), *Novaia Gazeta,* 5 December 2005.
[21] Nabi Abdullaev, "Secret Rules to Destroy Hijacked Jets Stir fears", *Moscow Times,* 31 March 2006.

leadership fell apart, and every agency started to fight on their own. The GrOU structure had lost all significance.[22] Thus, in only one of four cases (Dubrovka) did the operational leadership actually function more or less by the book and in one (Kizliar/Pervomaiskoe) was operational leadership part of the time conducted according to existing regulations.

Despite often not being followed, the formal procedures of operational leadership have at least been in place. Below that level, this has hardly been the case. In their 2006 survey of Russian counter-terrorist operations, above-mentioned General (R) I. N. Vorobyov and Professor V.A. Kiselev claim that on the level beneath operational leadership"existing documents are vague and mainly rhetorical, not providing any specific indications or guidelines as to how armed formations should act in a particular situation on the ground, how to ensure the unity of command in conducting a special counter-terrorist operation, how to achieve effective interaction and coordination of action by mixed arms units and formations, but most important, how to organize special training programs for them".[23]

Thus, in the organization of operational leadership it seems that the political authorities often do not trust formal regulations even when they have them. The regulations are there first of all in order to avoid time wasting deliberations on who should do what. However, they will of course, as any automatization of decision making does, deprive political leaders of some control. It denies them the possibility to chose among candidates for leadership when something has happened, and to take personal and situational considerations into account. This might be one reason why the Russian political leaders do not seem to trust these regulations. When Moscow (it is still unclear whether the order came from President Putin or Prime Minister Fradkov, or both) demanded that operational responsibility be handed over to the FSB at Beslan, despite the fact that regulations said that the local head of the GrOU should be in charge, this was an act in complete disregard of existing regulations. And, if the president or the prime minister feels free to disregard regulations in such a way, that sends a signal also to lower levels of the command.

It is interesting to note that despite the fact that the principle of GrOU leadership was set aside during the Beslan crisis, this did not mean that it was abolished afterwards. To the contrary, the GrOU principle was augmented by more detailed regulation after Beslan, and a number of exercises were held in North Ossetia and also other places in the Southern *Okrug* after Beslan to train according to this principle.[24] Despite these efforts, however, the GrOU principle broke down after only four hours at the mentioned raid on Nalchik.

The division of responsibility between central and local authorities has been another major challenge in these operations. In the case of *Budennovsk*, there was a major conflict between the local *ad hoc* operational staff, which thought storming of the hospital was the only viable course

[22] Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, "Basaev brosil boevikov v bede" (Basaev left his fighters to their own fate), *Novaia Gazeta,* 22 June 2006.
[23] I.N. Vorobyov and V.A. Kiselev, "The Armed Conflict: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorist Operations", *Military Thought,* No.1, 2006, p. 27.
[24] Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, "Sily bystrogo reformirovaniia" (Rapid Reorgaization Forces), *Novaia Gazeta,* 5 December 2005.

of action, and Prime Minister Chernomyrdin who wanted a negotiated settlement and was ready to accept many of the hostage-takers demands. The two storms were initiated without the PM's knowledge and approval. They were not successful in freeing the hostages but they made Basaev agree with Chernomyrdin to an arrangement whereby the hostages would be released in return for safe return to Chechnya and a promise of negotiations on the status of Chechnya. Here, again however, Moscow and the operational staff in *Budennovsk* were in disagreement. Chernomyrdin had promised Basaev safe retreat, but locally the Minister of the Interior Yerin nevertheless demanded that the Commander of the Russian forces in Chechnya, Anatolii Kulikov, opened fire on the buses that would take the terrorists back to Chechnya. Yerin was at that time so angry with Chernomyrdin because of what he saw as Chernomyrdin's spinelessness that he refused to talk to him. Sergei Stepashin was given the job of convincing Chernomyrdin that the terrorists should not go free after entering Chechnya.[25] According to one source, Chernomyrdin in a conversation with Stepashin agreed to open fire on the hostage takers despite promises to the contrary, but made the condition that they should not be fired upon until after they had re-entered Chechnya. However, in a conversation minutes later with Deputy Interior Minister, Mikhail Yegorov, Chernomyrdin categorically prohibited any armed encounter with the terrorists.[26]

It seems fair to conclude that political disregard for formal offices and regulations to varying degrees in these four cases created considerable uncertainty among operational decision makers, and also led to a much slower response than could have been the case if regulations had been followed.

3.2 Fear of responsibility

Fear of responsibility among decision makers has been a main ingredient in most criticisms of how Russia has dealt with her hostage situations. It has also been partly admitted by at least one government representative. Minister of the Interior during the Kizliar/Pervomaiskoe crisis, Anatolii Kulikov, has disclosed what happened when the news of this crisis broke. President Yeltsin gathered all relevant heads of security structures to a meting in the Kremlin. At this meeting he plainly asked them all at once who would like to be in charge. The question was, according to Kulikov, followed by "the silence of a grave". Everybody understood that to take charge of this operation, with its high risk of failure, would be the same as political suicide. Kulikov then, according to himself, said that it was an act of terrorism and that therefore the head of the FSB, Mikhail Barsukov, should be in charge, but that he, Kulikov, was ready to become his deputy.[27]

Cowardice and fear of responsibility as explanatory factors, however, rest upon the assumption that failure in operational leadership actually leads to severe political consequences for those in charge. That assumption is not borne out by evidence. In fact, only the Budennovsk operation turned out to have serious consequences for the operational leadership. After Budennovsk, both

[25] Evgenii Strigin, 2004, *KGB byl, est i budet* (The KGB was, is, and will be), Moscow, Algoritm, p.382.
[26] Aleksandr Mikhailov, 2001, *Portret Ministre – V kontekste smutnogo vremeni: Serheii Stepashin* (Portrait of a minister – In the context of troubled times: Sergei Stepashin), Moskva, Olma-Press, p.286.
[27] Kulikov quoted in Evgenii Strigin,2005, *FBS pri Barsukove (1995-1996),* Moscow, Algoritm, p.149.

Minister of the Interior, Viktor Yerin, and Director of the FBS, Sergei Stepashin, were forced to leave their posts. Still, even Budennovsk was only a very temporary setback. Two years after the event Stepashin was appointed Minister of Justice, and he later became head of the MVD and Prime Minister, before becoming head of the Russian Accounts Chamber in 2000.

Even if operational failure has limited or no negative consequences for the long-term careers of the ones in charge, it might still be very unpleasant at the time. Thus, it is tempting for operational leaders to make arrangements that makes it possible to take credit for what has worked, and at the same time put the blame for what went wrong on someone lower down in the hierarchy, or someone in another service or agency. Barsukov after Pervomaiskoe effectively portrayed that operation as generally successful. He was at the same time able to blame a commander from another agency, commander of the MVD troops Viacheslav Ovchinnikov, for the fact that Raduev and most of his companions escaped, and the head of the FSB centre for public communications, Aleksandr Mikhailov, for leakages to the press and for misinforming President Yeltsin.[28]

At Beslan the strategy of accepting authority without responsibility was even more sophisticated. The local head of the FSB, Valerii Andreev, was publicly put in charge of the operation. In parallel, the FSB deputy Directors Vladimir Pronichev and Vladimir Anisimov established their own covert operational staff at Beslan, which became the real decision-making body. This staff often kept Andreev in the dark about what was going on. Analyst Stephen Holms has pointed out how in Russia "a vital component of power is the ability to glide under the radar. The capacity to conceal one's power is itself a source or perhaps form of power".[29] After Beslan, Putin dismissed Andreev for his failures, whereas Pronichev and Anisimov remained unblemished. In this way the higher authorities from Moscow could lead the operation themselves, and at the same time single out a scapegoat for all the things that would most likely go wrong.

Although they had to take blame at the time, however, also these *lower level leaders* had few career problems later. Ovchinnikov, despite having to take the blame for Raduev's escape at Budennovsk, in 2000 became Commander in Chief of the MVD forces. Mikhailov, although dismissed from the public communications job after Budennovsk, was given a commanding position in another branch of the FSB. Andreev was after Beslan removed from operational duty. As soon as things had calmed down, however, Andreev was quietly promoted in rank and given the position of Deputy Director of the FSB Academy. Putin chose not to answer or comment, when he at a meeting with mothers who had lost children at Beslan, was confronted with the fact that the person officially in charge of handling Beslan had been dismissed, only in order to moments later being given a prestigious position somewhere else in the organization.[30] Thus,

[28] Abdyrazakov to Izmailov in *Novaia Gazeta,* 16 October 2003, and Valerii Iakov, "Komu nuzhna versiia o korridore dlia Raduieva?" (Who benefits from the story about Raduev being given free passage?), *Izvestiia,* 10 February 1996.
[29] Stephen Holmes, "Simulations of Power in Putin's Russia", in Andrew C. Kuchins, (ed.), 2002, *Russia After the Fall,* Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p.83.
[30] Pavel Magaev and Nino Balakhashvili, "Putin: Byvaet tak – mnogo generalov i oni drug druga meshaiut" (Putin: it happens that there are a lot of generals, and then they tend to disturb one another), *Novaia Gazeta,* 15 September 2005.

even if lower rank personnel are used as scapegoats, the consequences are seldom severe or long-lasting.

In summary, while both independent and official sources have alluded to fear of severe career consequences as being among the most important explanations for the weakness of operational leadership in Russian anti-terrorist campaigns, the evidence presented above questions this assumption. Top security agency bureaucrats have at least three ways of avoiding taking responsibility for failed anti-terrorist operations: (1) avoid responsibility altogether, which Barsukov seems to have tried until Kulikov pointed at him during the meeting with Yeltsin in the Kremlin in connection with Kizliar/Pervomaiskoe, (2) take on authority covertly in order to avoid responsibility, as did Pronichev and Anisimov at Beslan, or (3) through manipulation convince the president that the outcome was successful and put the blame for the things that went wrong on subordinates as did Barsukov after Pervomaiskoe.

It is interesting to observe that the only case after which top officials were dismissed, was Budennovsk – the only operation that ended with acceptance of the demands of the hostage-takers. Since then, blame tends to have been put on lower-rank officials. These have had to endure public disgrace for some time, as did also Yerin and Stepashin after Budennovsk, but as soon as the hostage-takings disappeared from the media, all these officials were quietly reinstated in good positions. The Kremlin seems to recognise the need to put on a show of repentance through dismissals, but the return to good careers for those dismissed suggest that there is very little real acceptance of blame inside the regime. Since lack of serious negative career consequences is a trend identified in a number of similar instances, the lesson that failure of leadership is not going to have serious negative personal consequences is by now expectedly learned by the top echelons of the Russian security structures. Thus, fear of dreadful personal consequences might not be as important an explanatory factor for chaotic operational leadership as many have proposed.

3.3 Institutional distrust

The initiation of leadership at the site of event seems to have taken place in a similar fashion in all of these operations. Local heads of relevant agencies – sometimes with the addition of central representatives of the agencies that more or less on their own initiative have arrived from Moscow – set up a meeting when they think enough professionals have arrived. Then they decide on a leader, often with scant attention to what existing regulations say. The authority of this leader is often fully respected only by his own agency.

Former KBG and FSB officer, Sergei Strigin, claims that “in accordance with Russian tradition” all who could, travelled from Moscow to Budennovsk in a totally uncoordinated manner.[31] The question of leadership was largely decided by who came first. Similarly, at Beslan, two hours after the school was taken, a number of local heads of different power structures in addition the prominent deputy of the State Duma, Dmitrii Rogozin, met in a local municipal administration

[31] Evgenii Strigin, 2004, *KGB byl, est i budet,* Moscow, Algoritm, p.377.

building. This collective decided that President Dzasokhov of North Ossetia should lead the operational staff. This was yet another decision in total disregard of regulation which said this should be the responsibility of the head of the local GrOU.

After Budennovsk, a disillusioned GRU Spetsnaz officer stated, "In these situations decisions should not be taken by a *kurultay* (Turkic word meaning a council) of authority figures, but by one single professional appointed by the political power. The repeated pluralism of decision making, involving different security structures, resulted in a cascade of uncoordinated actions and initiatives".[32] At Beslan, when the MVD had been largely excluded from the operational staff of the local head of the FSB, Andreev, and from almost all information on the operation, they still did not disband their own operational command. An *ad hoc* division of labour developed where the FSB concentrated on the hostage situation and the MVD concentrated on controlling the crowd outside the school and on evacuation of people in danger. However, there was little or no communication between the staffs. Thus, when the FSB sent some of its troops to a nearby village to train on storming a building, the MVD received reports of gunfire, and that a nearby village also had been taken over by the terrorists. The MVD immediately dispatched troops to the village, and the two agencies came very close to opening fire on each other.[33]

Another Beslan example of lack of coordination is the appointment of North-Ossetian FSB officer Zangionov as official negotiator with the hostage-takers. Because of the existence of several staffs and the secrecy among them, Zangionov according to his own account, did not know when he started to negotiate: (1) that Ruslan Aushev had already conducted negotiations and freed 26 hostages; (2) that the hostage-takers had already presented their demands to Aushev; and (3) that the hostage-takers had allowed representatives of the Ministry of Emergency to collect dead bodies from the school yard.[34]

Still, the most serious consequence of the chaotic leadership at Beslan was probably that no plan was developed, neither on how to perform an attack, nor on how to respond if the hostage-takers started to shoot hostages, or for what to do if the hostages tried to break out. From the point when the two bombs went off, and hostages started to pour out of the school, it took almost 30 minutes until FSB and MVD units started assaulting the building. According to John Giduck, who has interviewed a large number of security service officers present at Beslan, "with no one in command, and government officials paralysed by the unexpected turn of events, the commandos were left with no orders".[35]

According to Valerii Diatlenko, former head of the FSB in Rostov *oblast* and a member of the parliamentarian investigation commission after Beslan, it is not true that the agencies never inform each other, but they do so only at the top – at the level of ministers and deputy ministers in

[32] Evgenii Strigin, 2004, *KGB byl, est i budet,* Moscow, Algoritm, p.377.
[33] Svetlana Meteleva, "Sovershenno sekretno. Beslan bes grifov" (Top secret. Beslan non-classified), *Novaia Gazeta,* 26.05.05.
[34] Elena Milashina, "Iest liudi kotorym izvestno vse" (There are people who know everything), *Novaia Gazeta,* No. 65, 28-30 August 2006.
[35] John Giduck, 2005, *Terror at Beslan,* Archangel Group Inc. p147.

Moscow.[36] This means that the structure of information sharing is vertical. Information has to go up the line of command of the information giver to Moscow, and then down the line of command of the information receiver to the site of events. According to Diatlenko there are in particular four factors explaining why the security agencies are weary about sharing information horizontally and therefore stick to this cumbersome procedure: (1) it is difficult to separate very sensitive from less sensitive information, which leads to excessive caution; (2) the high level of corruption in all agencies means that everybody who give information away are afraid that it might be sold to the "enemy" by corrupt elements in the brother agency; (3) the competitive atmosphere among the agencies is still strong, and in this competition information is currency; and (4) the systems of information gathering and analysis among the different agencies are incompatible, which means that even if information is shared the receiving agency might not be able to efficiently use it.[37] Obviously, the vertical procedure for information sharing is way too slow in crisis situations.

4 Organizational learning and reform

It is difficult to see much improvement in the way organizational leadership has been conducted from the first to the last of the four cases studied in this paper. In the case of Budennovsk, the chaos is to some extent understandable because the event was so unprecedented. One could expect, nevertheless, that is was clear to the Russian leadership after Budennovsk that existing procedures for responsibility should, if something like this happened again, be followed in order to save time. In addition, the spheres of authority between Moscow and the staff handling the case at the local level, and between the different agencies at the site of event should be clarified and formalised. None of this seemed to have taken place before Kizliar/Pervomaiskoe, and only to a small extent later.

That, however, does not mean that the hostage crises have not led to any organizational reform. In the FSB, after Budennovsk, a special anti-terrorist centre was created. This centre was expanded into a department in 1997. Furthermore, the organizational rearrangements in August 2004 and March 2006, described at the beginning of this section, were all meant to address organizational problems. In this regard, maybe the most radical organizational measure was the August 2004 decentralisation of authority. Not only was operational responsibility laid on local GrOU heads, it was also stated explicitly that they had authority to make major operational decisions without conferring with Moscow. According to the Russian expert Andrei Soldatov, this degree of decentralization is unprecedented among industrialised nations.[38]

However, neither Budennovsk nor Kizliar/Pervomaiskoe were followed up by more elaborate efforts at security sector reform, possibly because Russian authorities did not recognize these

[36] Valerii Diatlenko to Andreii Soldatov and Irina Borogan, "Borba s terrorismom: siloviki ne meniaiutsia" (War on terrorism: security officials do not change), *Novaia Gazeta,* 19 december 2005.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Andrei Soldatov, *Rossiiskaia sistema predotvrashenia teraktov: spustia god posle Beslana* (The Russian system of preventing terrorist incidents: one year after Beslan), at http://studies.agentura.ru/.

incidents as failures, neither to the public nor to themselves. This was also the case with Dubrovka, which probably more than any of the other incidents was considered a "success" despite a significant number of casualties and a number of documented serious mistakes. One possible explanation for this lack of self-criticism could be that the FSB thought the government's "success" at Dubrovka had dissuaded the Chechens from further large-scale hostage-takings. The authorities might have though that Kizliar/Pervomaiskoe happened because of governmental weakness at Budennovsk, but that the tough government response at Dubrovka had shown the terrorists the futility of further actions of the same kind.[39]

In this regard, Beslan, was much more difficult to pass off as a success, even for a regime with very substantial media control. The March 2006 organizational reforms in the security services were not a direct result of Beslan. They had been initiated before Beslan and were a parts of a broader governmental reform in Russia. But, Putin very soon after Beslan issued order no. 1167, which specifically stated that lessons from Beslan should be integrated into new organizational models and procedures. The official Duma investigation commission under the leadership of Deputy Aleksandr Torshin, concluded after Beslan that "the actions of the leaders for the security agencies were in general sound, […] in a pressured situation the operational staff acted in accordance with laws and regulations, and all possible measures were taken to save the life and health of the hostages and to minimize the consequences of the terrorist act".[40] Despite the positive evaluation of operational leadership from the official investigating commission, order 1167 can be seen as a partial admittance that leadership had not worked out as it should.

As pointed out by Andrei Soldatov, however, most of these organizational reforms were of a "cosmetic character", renaming directorates into departments and so on.[41] According to another analyst, Aleksandr Golts, any number of organizational reforms will have little effect on the efficiency of leadership in future operations unless also the mentality of operational leaders is changed.[42] In an effort to address this point, the Duma introduced a concept called "personal responsibility" in reference to the handling of anti-terrorist operations in the March 2006 anti-terrorism bill.[43] It is unclear, however, how this personal responsibility is going to bring about a change of mentality in the Russian security services.

Boin, 't Hart, Stern and Sundelius point out that organizational learning from crises is most likely if a group consisting of "a critical mass of people qualified to tease out cause-and-effect relations and determine their validity" is set down, and if this group of "crisis auditors" is protected from political interference.[44] While somewhat similar groups have been established in Russia after all

[39] On this, see Andrei Soldatov, "Ot pobedy do Beslana" (From victory to Beslan), *Moskovskie Novosti,* 22 october 2004.
[40] Quoted in Elena Milashina, "1 sentiabria. God posle Beslana. Den neznania", *Novaia Gazeta,* 1 September 2005.
[41] Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, "Security. Rapid Reorgaization Force", *Novaia Gazeta,* 7 december 2005, plus author's interview with Soldatov in Moscow September 2006.
[42] Aleksandr Golts, "Sily net, uma tozhe", *Ezhenedelnii Zhurnal,* 13 September 2004.
[43] Nabi Abdullaev, "Anti-Terror Bill Clears Last Hurdle", *Moscow Times,* 2 March 2006.
[44] Arjen Boin, Paul `t Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius, 2005, *The Politics of Crisis Management – Public Leadership under Pressure,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.117.

major terrorist events, mostly in the form of parliamentarian investigations commissions, their protection from political interference has been close to zero, and they have therefore not been able to contribute seriously to organizational learning. Politically autonomous investigative bodies with real powers presuppose a high acceptance of political pluralism, something which is largely absent in today's Russia.

There seems to be little reason to doubt that operational leadership has been a major problem in Russia's handling of these terrorist incidents, and that the few organizational efforts that have been adopted to address these problems have had little effect. One reason might be that the political leadership itself often disregards the content of these efforts, and because a change in mentality and ideology might be as important as, or even more important than, a change in organizational procedures.

5 Conclusion

All the four cases discussed in this paper have to a smaller or larger extent been characterised by a "fog of war".[45] This "fog of war" is a phenomenon that no country's authorities can escape. Some of the failures and mistakes described could therefore easily have happened also in other countries. However, after repeated exposure to very similar incidents of "fog of war", one could have expected a degree of learning higher than what seems to have been the case in Russia. For example, although it was an obviously serious mistake that the authorities forgot to have enough ambulances ready after the storming of Dubrovka, they made the exact same mistake less than two years later at Beslan. This suggests very limited organizational learning and change. Recurring similar external shocks did not significantly alter rules, procedures and attitudes in such a way that mistakes were not repeated. This fact can at least partly be explained by the peculiarities of political processes under limited democracy.

The most important lesson that Russian authorities seem to have taken from these hostage-takings is that they shall never in earnest negotiate with terrorists. That was done at Budennovsk, and led to a very widespread opinion in the Russian elite that giving in to demands only increases the chances of repetition. Kizliar and Pervomaiskoe confirmed this lesson.

Even if it is difficult to say whether other countries would have done better or worse in similar circumstances, there are still a number of factors discussed in this study that are peculiar to Russia or more pronounced in Russia than many other places, and that negatively contributed to how these crises were handled.

First, the regime's ability to convince itself that things were handled ok, or even better than last time, seems to have been a major impediment to learning. *Barsukov* seems to have been able to convince Yeltsin that *Pervomaiskoe* went well, *Dubrovka* was widely seen as a success despite a

[45] Fog of War: "the level of ambiguity in situational awareness experienced by participants in military operations", definition used at the British Joint Service Command and Staff College, at http://en.wikipedia.or/wiki/Fog_of_war

high number of dead and wounded, and as we have seen, even *Beslan* was portrayed by the official investigation commission as generally well handled. Although, in the latter case Putin indirectly admitted that some tings could have been handled better by issuing an order for lessons from *Beslan* to be incorporated into the national security sector reform process. It is likely that the ever more closed character of the Russian political regime, and the gradual silencing of dissenting voices, are important preconditions for the dominance of a self-congratulatory attitude.

Second, the tendency to accredit *persons* rather than *offices* and *regulations* with authority, has greatly limited any potentially positive effects of organizational reform. As we have seen, which office that according to regulation should have been in charge was often totally ignored when operational responsibility was decided upon. Eugene Huskey has called the personalization of authority a "most obvious cultural vestige in Russia".[46] This vestige is not helpful in a crisis, when time is of the essence. In such situations automatic reactions in accordance with established procedures are the most likely to yield rapid response.

Third, the willingness to sacrifice hostages' lives and health appears higher in Russia than in many other countries. This does not necessarily mean that Russian authorities and security agencies feel less empathy with the hostages than in other countries, but there seems to be a particularly high readiness to sacrifice individuals for operational and political purposes. To catch or kill *Raduev* and his men at *Pervomaiskoe*, and thus not repeat the humiliation of Russia associated with *Budennovsk*, seems to have been an important motivation for *Barsukov's* decision to knowingly launch a full scale military attack on the village while there was a large number of villagers and hostages inside.

Despite Russian distinctiveness, the Russian experience from hostage crisis might still be relevant to other countries in their planning for similar contingencies. In addition, this experience is also relevant if the current ideas of joint Russian-Western handling of terrorist incidents, such as hostage-takings, should be implemented in the future. The NATO-Russia Council's NATO-Russia Action Plan on Terrorism explicitly states both that the parties should "exchange information and compare lessons learned from responses to terrorist attacks", and that they are "determined to improve the capability of our armed forces to work together in combating the terrorist threat".[47] And, even if the current climate in Russian-Western relations means that this type of cooperation is not on the planning agenda now, there is the possibility that Russia and one or more Western nations could suddenly find themselves involved in a hostage crisis where the hostage are both Russian and Western. In such situations common action might become required even if not planned for, and knowledge of the other party's practices will be of essence. This paper has aimed to make a small contribution towards this aim.

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[46] Eugene Huskey, 1999, *Presidental Power in Russia,* London, M.E. Sharpe, p.9.

[47] *NATO-Russia Action Plan on Terrorism* at http://www.nato.int/docu/basictxt/b041209a-e.htm. Similarly, potential joint Russian-Western deployment to sites of terrorist attacks was one of the propositions to emerge from the 2005 RAND conference *Engaging Russia as Partner and Participant.* See conference proceedings at http://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/2005/RAND_CF203.pdf

Appendix A Tactical issues

The following discussion consists of a series of short investigations into tactical aspects of the Russian handling of the four cases. The different aspects considered are divided into two sub-categories. First, we examine what might be called "Russian peculiarities". By that we mean ways of thinking and doing things that are different from what most decision makers in Western countries would think of or contemplate to do. Then follows a discussion of tactical dilemmas encountered in these cases that we expect are of a more common nature to such incidents wherever they take place. It might, however, be difficult to draw a very sharp distinction between the two categories. Thus, even if a certain tactical question or dilemma is put into one category, that does not mean it cannot also have aspects that would belong in the other category. Most of the examples in this section come from the Beslan case, because that case has been the one most thoroughly studied both in Russia and in the West. In addition, this section owes a lot to John Giduck's book *Terror at Beslan.* Many of points raised are borrowed from that book, and supplied with information and judgments from other sources where these could be found.

A.1 "Russian peculiarities"

A.1.1 Use of heavy firearms

Russian forces used heavy firearms both at Pervomaiskoe and at Beslan, in particular helicopter gun ships, tanks, armoured personnel carriers, RPGs and rocket infantry flame-throwers. At Pervomaiskoe these weapons were used to level the village with the ground. At Beslan, however, their use is more uncertain. The official investigating commission only admits that tanks fired at the school after all the hostages had either fled or were dead, in order to finish of the remaining terrorists. The "alternative" investigation of Duma Deputy Iurii Savelev, however, claims that both tanks, RPGs and rocket infantry flame throwers were used while many hostages were still inside the school, as mean to bring overwhelming fire power on the hostage takers. Giduck claims that at least at one point the use of a tank was vitally necessary for the operation. At the far end of the east wing of the school special forces tried to "feverishly untangle the intricate and delicate web of wires set to detonate the explosives at the doors to the school".[48] With hostages being shot while fleeing the school, the security forces realised that there was no time for making the doors ready for entering, and therefore made the tank fire "a non-exploding shell into the doorway just inside the alley, blowing a hole more than sufficient for the teams to enter".[49]

A.1.2 The need to secure an area whereas the need for speed

At Beslan the Russian units also decided that the speed of operation was more important than to secure areas taken. Thus, they moved rather quickly from room to room, instead of employing the much more cumbersome and time demanding procedure of completely securing one area before moving to the next. According to Giduck, this decision is very different from what American Special Forces would have done in similar circumstances.[50]

[48] Giduck, p.148.
[49] Giduck, p.149.
[50] Giduck, p.155.

A.1.3 "Human shield" situations

Again according to Giduck, when hostages are used by the hostage takers as human shields, Russian special forces will tend to consider the hostages as in reality already dead. Thus, they will focus on taking out the hostage taker, even if it means shooting him through the hostage. Giduck claims, "if Russian forces have access to firearms, and a terrorist holds a hostage in front of him, they shoot. They shoot fast, and they shoot at lot".[51]

A.1.4 "Kontrzakhvat"

The Russian term "kontrzakhvat" means to take members of hostage takers families or others to whom they have a personal relationship hostage in return. In addition, there is also the implicit assumption that the authorities are ready to inflict harm on these hostages in order to influence the behaviour of the hostage takers. The idea of *kontrzakhvat* was brought up already at Budennovsk, but not by the Russian authorities. In an effort to improve the negotiations with Shamil Basayev, the Russian authorities brought his brother Shirvani to Budennovsk. Shirvani immediately told FSB head Sergei Stepashin: "dear Sergei Vadimovych, you must immediately take me and all other relatives of Basayev who are at present in Vedeno hostage. Line us up in front of the hospital, and tell Basayev that unless he leaves the hospital and lets all the hostages go, we will all be executed. And then you must implement this, shooting us one by one". Stepashin refused even to consider Shirvani's advice, and Shirvani then told him "in that case you will loose".[52]

Later, however, Russian authorities have to some extent embraced the idea of *kontrzakhvat.* During the Beslan crisis relatives of Chechen resistance leader Aslan Maskhadov's wife were taken hostage. Since Maskhadov in all likelihood had nothing to do with the hostage taking, and also publicly condemned it, it is unclear what the authorities wanted to obtain by this move. In addition to Beslan, *kontrzakhvat* has been used numerous times in Chechnya, especially during the second Chechen war and especially by the forces under control of the present Chechen Prime Minister Ramzan Kadyrov. *Kontrzakhvat* has in these cases been used to force individual separatists to give up their fight and turn themselves in. The tactic has sometimes yielded the wanted result.

After Beslan, General Prosecutor Vladimir Ustinov, publicly suggested to the Duma to legalize the practice of *kontrzakhvat.* The Duma did not support this initiative, among other reasons probably because it directly contravenes article 34 of the 1949 Geneva Convention. This convention explicitly forbids the taking of hostages. Thus, legalizing *kontrzakhvat* would likely have led to international outrage against Russia. However, the continued *practice* of *kontrzakhvat* and the lack of legal implications for those who practice it, suggests that the measure in Russia today is considered legitimate if not directly legal. There is every reason to expect that this method will be tried again if there is another Beslan or similar incident.

It is inconceivable that Western democracies would resort to this method. However, there is a more general question of to what extent it is possible to find non-human valuables, material or

[51] Giduck, p.256.
[52] Evgenii Strigin, 2004, *KGB byl, est i budet,* Moscow, Algoritm, p.379.

non-material, that are so treasured by the hostage takers that a threat to destroy them could be used as a successful bargaining tactic. In addition, if the hostage takers are seen to be on good terms with and even supported by another state, there is also the question of whether there are incentives or sanctions that can be brought to bear on that state in order for it to persuade the hostage takers to end their endeavour.

A.1.5 Lack of fire discipline

Lack of fire discipline was a problem both at Budennovsk and Beslan. One of the major topics of discussion after Beslan has been whether the two explosions in the gym that led to the storming of the building were caused by accident, i.e. the bombs fell to the floor and exploded because they were insufficiently fastened to the baseball nets (the version of the official investigating commission), or whether they came as a result of the hostage taker controlling them being shot by a Russian sniper. Irrespective of what caused the two bombs to go off, uncontrolled shooting was a problem at Beslan as it had been at Budennovsk. This shooting unnecessarily put both the hostages and rescuers at additional risk. Better determination of sectors and vectors for firing could possibly have averted some of this shooting. It is unclear to what extent Russian operational leaders tried to do this in the two instances.

A.2 "Common" operational and tactical questions

A.2.1 The use of helicopters

Helicopters were used both at Pervomaiskoe and at Beslan. We have seen how they were used to fire at the colonna of buses at Pervomaiskoe. At Beslan, however, they seem to have been largely useless. Because of fear that the hostage takers would shoot them down with RPGs, the helicopter pilots refused to go near enough the school to for example descent Special Forces on the roof. The helicopters might potentially also have contributed to the problem, by making the hostage takers more nervous and therefore less patient with the hostages. John Giduck advises that if helicopters are to be used in these kinds of situations, they must be in the air all the time with teams ready inside to assault the roof as soon as a possibility opens up.[53]

A.2.2 The use of gas

The use of gas at Dubrovka was clever. It could have been a very great success if operational coordination had been better. Efficient operational command and coordination could have ensured that the medical personnel who took care of the unconscious hostages had been issued the correct antidote (naxolon), and that enough ambulances have been available for evacuation.

The use of gas was also considered at Beslan, and Giduck claims on the basis of the many interviews he has done with Russian security forces that to the Russians gas is "a virtual panacea in hostage-taking situations, and in almost two solid months of interviews of military experts I found only one who felt the use of gas would not have been effective at Beslan".[54] So far no

[53] Giduck, p.358.
[54] Giduck, p.218.

complete picture has emerged with regard to why gas was not used. One reason was probably that the rebels had learned from Dubrovka, and therefore knocked out all the windows of the school very soon after entering. Still, depending on the degree of ventilation of the building and the degree of wind around the building, they could still potentially achieved a thinning rate of gas slow enough for it to have had substantial effect.

One Russian officer said to Giduck that in these situations gas grenades are often a better choice than flash bang or concussion grenades, because "you never know how the hostages are going to react, and children will panic, running right into the line of fire".[55] Others suggested that sleeping gas would have been better than the paralyzing gas used at Dubrovka. The Russian officers also suggested that the use of gas could have positive effects even if it did not seriously incapacitate the hostage takers. If the hostages are paralyzed or set asleep by gas, they will not panic. Thus, they will not race around creating problems for the rescuers, and there is also less chance that they will be shot by the hostage takers. In addition, paralyzed or asleep hostages will not be possible to use as human shields for the hostage takers. This use of the hostages was a great problem at Beslan.

A.2.3 Responding to hostage takers demands for media attention

In all the cases discussed in this study, media attention has been one of the main priorities for the hostage takers. At Budennovsk Shamil Basayev even held a "press conference" inside the hospital. A group of about 20 journalists were allowed into the building, taken on a guided tour of the premises, and allowed a 30-minute Q and A session with Basayev. That experience was not repeated in the other cases, but the emphasis put not just on media attention but also on the content of what was said in the media was not lowered. In all the four cases Russian authorities initially reported numbers of hostages far below the real number. Whether this was out of ignorance, or in order to portray the situation as less grave than it was, it always had the same effect. The hostages unanimously state that the hostage takers were enraged by what they saw as the authorities attempt to diminish the scale and importance of their endeavour, and the treatment of the hostages became much worse. At Beslan the hostage takers delivered a self-made video explaining their action to the authorities and demanded that it be shown on the major state TV channels. When the authorities denied this demand, the hostages were denied water and food. While it is understandable that state authorities do not want to "reward" hostage takers by giving them access to state vide media, the refusal of such demands must be weighted against the possible negative effects for the hostages.

A.2.4 The problem of bystanders

The problem of bystanders, usually those whose relatives have been taken hostage, was in particular a problem at Budennovsk and Beslan. Not just are these bystanders themselves in danger, but they might also greatly complicate the work of the security agencies. Giduck claims that the inability to control bystanders was

[55] Giduck, p.219.

"one of the greatest errors committed by the Russians at Beslan; one that led to many other problems. The Russians were weak in controlling both ingress and egress. This collapse of discipline and clear tactical duties of the various assigned units allowed civilians with weapons inside the perimeter. The soldiers could not have known whether these were part of the other terror teams they believed were holed up in the city. These citizens could have just as easily turned to the Alpha and Vympel commandos and started shooting them".[56]

In addition there were sporadic firefights between civilians and hostage-takers throughout the crisis, and several of the hostages who fled the school may also have been victims of stray bullets from civilians aiming for the hostage takers. To avoid this situation, the operational leadership would have had to anticipate the problem and take very early measures to prevent it. There seems to have been very little coordination between the different agencies on this issue, and also very little prior training in crowd control. In addition, there were too few troops for this labour-intensive task. Giduck suggests that a series of concentric secure perimeters should be constructed for the purpose of controlling bystanders.[57] It must, however, be added that Beslan was especially difficult in this respect because of the widespread ownership of fire-arms in the North Caucasus and because of a culture of readiness to use them. Still, even less volatile bystanders might create substantial problem if not controlled.

A.2.5 Search for off site accomplices

There will be a natural tendency in all operations that respond to this kind of emergencies to concentrate all attention on the site where the hostage taking is located. However, as pointed out to Giduck by FSB Colonel Ryabko, hostage takers might often have additional teams in other nearby areas. These units might have a number of different tasks. Among others, they might provide intelligence to those who hold the hostages, they might be ready to bring in additional equipment or reinforcements, or they might be ready to "open a second front" if they deem that useful. According to Ryabko, Russian special forces always expect that:

"the most visible actions of the terrorists – as in a school seizure – represent merely one part of the entire terrorist operation, and that there may be a great deal of activity elsewhere in that city".[58]

Giduck explains that in "Israel this is a foregone conclusion. As soon as the tactical units receive word of a terrorist assault, a number of responding teams do not go anywhere near the site of attack at all".[59] The *Al Qaeda Manual* or Manchester Document, found by English police during a search in May 2000, confirm that terrorists plan to have several not on site units deployed when initiating these kinds of attacks.[60]

[56] Giduck, p.343.
[57] Giduck, p.343.
[58] Giduck, p.341.
[59] ibid.
[60] ibid.

A.2.6 Use of snipers

Snipers were used in all four operations, but at least at Beslan the snipers were disturbed by constant radio messages from superiors.

A.2.7 Contingency assault plan

A major deficiency both at Budennovsk and Beslan was the lack of planning. There were no real assault plans, and also no contingency plan for what to do if the hostage takers started to execute hostages of if the hostages tried to escape. The main reason for this fact seems to have been chaotic operational leadership, and not any mental aversion on the Russian side against such plans. Russian military personnel were adamant in their interviews with Giduck that any such plan should include an estimate of how many hostages that are likely to die as a result. Giduck claims that the Russians have no specific figure for when expected losses would prevent an assault, but other sources have cited 30% of the hostages as an approximate Russian threshold.

A.2.8 Maximum use of force?

Giduck in his book defends that the Russian forces at Dubrovka put a single round in the head of every hostage taker they encountered, including those who were unconscious from the gas. He, however, also cites a conversation with an American law enforcement officer who said he thought that no American policeman would act in this manner.[61] The Russian forces were heavily criticised for this practice after Dubrovka. Many saw it as unnecessarily brutal.

A.2.9 Use of deception and diversion

McGeorge in his study cites several examples of successful use of diversion in large hostage situations.

At Entebbe airport in Uganda, Israeli commandos successfully freed 105 hostages that had been taken by a combination of Palestinians and German left radicals, supported by the forces of pro-Palestinian Ugandan President Idi Amin. In this operation the Israelis used a Mercedes of the kind favoured by higher Ugandan officers when approaching the airport. In this way they managed to fool most of the Ugandan troops guarding the hostage takers, and this made their entry to the airport substantially easier.

When Palestinians hijacked a German plane and forced it to land in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1997, German special forces both created a large bonfire in a sand dune in front of the aircraft to lure the hostage takers into the cockpit, and they detonated thunder flash grenades on both sides of the aircraft and in fort of it. All eighty-six hostages were rescued.[62]

Something similar was also attempted at Budennovsk. Before the first storming of the hospital, the federal forces fired into the air for about 25 minutes. According to journalist Sergei Topol, who was present at the scene of events, however, is was unclear exactly how this shooting should

[61] Giduck, p.352.
[62] Harvey J. McGeorge, 1983, "Plan Carefully, Rehearse Throughly, Execute Violently: The Tactical Response to Hostage Situations", *World Affairs,* Vol. 146, No.1, p.63.

function as a diverson tactic. Before the second storm the federals broadcasted false information that a colonna of tanks was moving towards Budennovsk, again. however, it is not clear what effect they expected this news to have on the hostage takers.[63]

A.2.10 Accurate rehearsals

Russian Special Forces at Beslan trained on storming buildings prior to the storm on the school, but the different agencies did not train together. Still, relatively accurate rehearsals were possible even in the short time frame of Beslan. Similarly, according to McGregor, the Israeli commandos "built mock-ups and conducted full scale rehearsals prior to assaulting Entebbe Airport".[64] It is of course difficult to estimate to what extent operations were improved by these rehearsals, but it seems fair to assume that they had some effect.

[63] Sergei Topol, 2005, *Budennovsk – Reportazh pod pritselom,* De Facto, Moscow, pp.70-101.
[64] McGeorge, p.62.