

Putin Trapped By His Own Principles

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President Putin is as much of a hostage as the 500 theatre-goers in Moscow. He has few options left to end the stand-off in the capital or the wider war that he started in Chechnya.

The Russian leader has vowed never to talk to any Chechen rebels unless they surrender unconditionally, and the rebels have made it clear that they are ready to blow the building apart if a rescue operation is launched.

The world has seen hostages taken on this scale only once in recent years, and that was also by Chechen rebels.

In June 1995, a group of 150 or so fighters seized a hospital in the southern Russian town of Budyonnovsk and held 1,200 people hostage. At the end of a week of violence and bungled rescue attempts, more than 100 people were dead and the Chechens had been allowed safe passage home in return for the release of their captives and the beginning of peace talks.

This situation is more serious because it is taking place in Moscow and a peaceful resolution appears difficult.

The Kremlin is unlikely to negotiate, as it did in 1995. In the Russian popular memory, the siege of Budyonnovsk is associated less with the saving of hundreds of lives and a peace process, than with the fact that Shamil Basayev, the rebel commander who later became Russia's main enemy in the Caucasus, was freed. Basayev is at large in Chechnya, fighting Russian forces.

President Putin has consistently called all Chechen separatists "terrorists" and refused to talk to any of them unless they surrender unconditionally. He has also applied this principle to Aslan Maskhadov, the man whom Russia and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe officially recognised as the elected leader of Chechnya in 1997.

This is despite Mr Maskhadov's frequent calls for dialogue to end the bloodshed in Chechnya. Mr Maskhadov has not yet reacted to the taking of the hostages in Moscow, but it seems unlikely that he has approved it as he has previously condemned civilian involvement. So there is little chance that Mr Putin will talk to Movsar Barayev, the leader of the hostage-takers.

Barayev is the nephew of Arbi Barayev, a Chechen fighter and kidnapper, who was killed by the Russians last year. Barayev has been involved in the deaths of hundreds of civilians, including the four British-based (three British and one New Zealander) telecommunications engineers who were beheaded in Chechnya in 1998.

Most importantly, Mr Putin has built his presidency on the pledge that he is a tough leader who was sorting out the Chechen issue once and for all. In 1999, Mr Putin famously declared of the rebels: "We will rub them out in the toilet." His use of gangster slang helped to boost his popularity and propel him towards being elected President six months later.

For anyone who has closely watched Chechnya, the premise that the war was ending has long seemed absurd. Around 20 Russian soldiers die in operations in the republic each week.

The Kremlin's forces are accused of waging a campaign of extortion, torture and rape against the civilian population. Yet most of the outside world, including the majority of Russians, has managed to turn a blind eye to the suffering of the Chechens.

Russians have taken notice only when there was massive loss of life, as happened in August, when 120 soldiers and their relatives died when the helicopter they were travelling in was shot down by rebels.

Chechnya has long been a nightmare for anyone directly caught up in the conflict there. It is grim, but unsurprising that the nightmare has finally spread to Moscow.

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