



# Who's Blowing Up Russia?

By Vladimir Voronov

*Foreword by David Satter*

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## Foreword

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Of all the strange events that have taken place in post-communist Russia, none is more mysterious than the 1999 apartment bombings that brought Putin to power. In this article, written for the Russian Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty<sup>1</sup>, Vladimir Voronov, an investigative journalist, examines the many unanswered questions about the bombings which for 15 years have cast a sinister shadow over the Putin era. As Russia becomes ever more deeply involved in a bloody war in Ukraine, it is the apartment bombings that serve as a warning of the acts of which Putin and his cronies may be capable.

-- David Satter

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was written for the Russian Service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. It can be accessed at, Voronov, V. 'Kto vzryvaet Rossiyu?', *svoboda.org*, 25 September 2014, available at: <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26605153.html>

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**It has been fifteen years since bombings in Buynaksk, Moscow and Volgodonsk claimed 307 lives. But who was behind them remains a mystery**

There were supposed to be not four explosions but five. The fifth was planned for Ryazan, a city southeast of Moscow, on the night of September 22-23. But on the evening of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, a resident of one of the neighborhoods of the city noticed a man carrying heavy sacks from a car into the basement of his building. And bearing in mind what happened in Buynaksk, Moscow and Volgodonsk, he immediately called the police. The residents of the building were evacuated and the information media, which in those days was working very efficiently, reported that the bags contained the high explosive, hexogen.

The news was confirmed on September 24<sup>th</sup> by the Minister of Internal Affairs Vladimir Rushailo who informed the public about the “avoidance yesterday of the blowing up of an apartment house in Ryazan.” But only an hour and a half later, the Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Nikolai Patrushev announced that the FSB was carrying out an anti-terrorist exercise in Ryazan and the bags did not contain explosives.

This episode was and remains the most mysterious aspect of the whole, terrible tragedy that engulfed Russia in the first three weeks of September 1999. But this and the other episodes are shrouded to this day in a no less dense covering of secrets and lies.

Fifteen years on, the question of who blew up the Moscow apartment blocks in September 1999 remains unanswered. Moscow was not the only city where residential buildings were blown up, but it was the bombings in the capital that shook the country. The first explosion of a residential building was in the Dagestani city of Buynaksk on the evening of 4<sup>th</sup> September 1999. Around 10pm, a truck loaded with explosives detonated near a five story apartment block, home to the families of the 136<sup>th</sup> army brigade. The bodies of 64 dead and 146 injured residents were pulled from the rubble. Almost immediately, the official explanation of what happened was murky. The authorities announced that a second mined truck had been found fifteen minutes before its device was due to detonate. The authorities first announced that the truck was near a hospital and carried two tons of hexogen. Soon afterwards, they claimed it carried not hexogen but a different type of explosive and that the truck itself was not near a hospital but close to a munitions storage facility. Later still, officials claimed there was no truck at all but two cars: one carrying 100kg of TNT that was de-activated near the local police station eight minutes before the explosion, and another that was next to a military hospital. Officials said the second car carried what was “a record amount of explosives in Russian history - 930kg of aluminum and magnet shavings mixed with TNT. The car was meant to explode at 2am”.

The second explosion took place on the night of 9<sup>th</sup> September 1999, almost exactly at midnight, in the Moscow district of Pechatniki. The target was a 9-story residential block at 19, Guryanova Street. According to officials, no fewer than 100 people were killed and 690 injured. Four days later, on Monday 13<sup>th</sup> September 1999 at about 5am, another Moscow apartment block was blown up: an eight-story brick building at 6/3, Kashirskoye Highway. 125 people died and seven others were injured. In both of the bombings in Moscow, explosives were placed in the buildings in

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advance. Three days later, on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1999 at around 6am, there was an explosion in Volgodonsk, a city in the southern Russian region of Rostov, near an apartment block, at number 5, Oktyabrskiy Street. Just as in Buynaksk, terrorists used a truck loaded with explosives. 19 people were killed and 145 were injured.

### **“It doesn’t look like gas”**

While Chechen terrorists were blamed for the Buynaksk explosions almost immediately, in the case of the Moscow bombings everything was more complicated. When the building in Pechatniki was blown up on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1999, the official version was that the cause was “gas related”. Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov was quick to announce that “the version of a terrorist attack is rather improbable as the place was not an attractive target to terrorists”. The Minister of Internal Affairs, Vladimir Rushailo, told Interfax news agency that there was no evidence of explosives inside the building. That same day, even Prime Minister Vladimir Putin cautiously supported the “gas” version: “The official version of the Ministry of Emergency Situations with regard to today’s incident on Guryanova Street in Moscow is an explosion of utility gas”. The head of the ministry, however, took a completely different position. Without calling the explosions a terrorist attack, Sergei Shoigu hinted to journalists that “this does not look like gas”. But when Putin publicly referred to the Ministry of Emergency Situations, Shoigu disavowed what he had said.

In the afternoon of 9<sup>th</sup> September 1999, Luzhkov changed his story. He announced what nobody in the Kremlin or the State Duma had dared to say. Luzhkov declared that his “purely preliminary thoughts are that everything points towards the fact that this is a barbaric terrorist act”, that “the echoes of the war in Dagestan have reached the capital for the first time” and that “everything is very similar to the incident in Buynayksk”. In essence, Luzhkov argued, “It is an attempt by bandits to take revenge for their defeat in Dagestan”. With these words, the Moscow mayor – who had initially stood by the “gas” version – became the first official to publicly link the terrorist act in Moscow to the war in Dagestan. And this version – “the bandit’s revenge for defeat in Dagestan” – was soon to become the authorities’ official explanation for the bombings. When journalists asked Luzhkov why terrorists blew up an apartment block on the outskirts of Moscow rather than an elite building in the city center, he replied: “it is not such a clear choice from the point of view of the saboteurs”.

Following the explosion on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1999 on Kashirskoye Highway, the Russian Minister of Internal Affairs Vladimir Rushailo blamed Chechen terrorists straight away: “What happened in Moscow was done by Khattab’s and Basayev’s men – there’s no doubt about it”. Vladimir Putin echoed this claim, saying: “It is obvious to us that both in Dagestan and in Moscow, we are dealing not with amateur terrorists but with well-trained international saboteurs. They are not self-taught but experts in ‘subversive’ activity in the broadest sense”. Soon after, Prime Minister Putin outlined his thoughts on why the bombings had taken place: “Those who organized and planned this series of cruel terrorist attacks have far-reaching plans. They count on creating political tension in Russia. Their main task is to destabilize the situation in the country. Their goal is to demoralize authorities, to shatter the basis of the state, to disturb the normal work of government bodies and to create panic in society”.

The rescue operation was fully underway and the rubble had not yet been cleared. The investigation had only just started and no expert evaluation had been carried out. Yet, the Prime Minister already knew the details of what had happened: who the terrorists were and what their plan was. The head of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) used the same language as Putin. He told the daily “Moskovsky Komsomolets” newspaper on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1999: “... one of the versions put forward from the investigation is that of a terrorist act, intended to destabilize the situation in Moscow, frighten people and put pressure on authorities to make decisions beneficial to those behind this”.

The same day, officials announced that explosives had been found in several locations in Moscow. Boxes with hexogen were discovered in the basement of a building on Kashirskoye Highway and in a neighbouring school. Later, however, this was denied by other officials. On Borisovsky Street, however, police found three to four tons of ammonal mixed with nitrate, aluminum powder, TNT blended with sugar, packages of plastid, electric exploders, blast inhibitors and rolls of blasting time fuses. While there were different accounts of what explosives were used, the official version was nevertheless conflicting: at times, the authorities spoke of ammonal, at others of hexogen, and at still others of TNT, or they spoke confidently about possible combinations of all of the above. Initially, the most popular story was that hexogen had been discovered, but later officials began telling a different story: terrorists had built the bombs from homemade explosives by mixing ammonium nitrate, aluminum dust and sugar. Officials often struggled to explain what had happened to the TNT and hexogen.

Yet another set of explosives – 76 bags with more than 3.5 tons of explosives – was found in a garage in south eastern Moscow. A label on the bags read: “Circassia sugar refinery”. The discovery was immediately reported on the radio and on television when authorities could instead have set up an ambush to catch the terrorists. During a media briefing on September 15<sup>th</sup> 1999, Moscow’s police chief Aleksandr Veldyaev announced that “the Ministry of Interior and the FSB discovered a pre-planned terrorist attack: disguised as sugar, around 19 tons of explosives were transported to Moscow. Almost all of it was found and removed”.

Following a phone call from a vigilant citizen on the night of 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1999, police found bags containing 200kg of explosives in the basement of a residential building in Ryazan. As the job of disposing of the bags was left to the local police, de-activating the explosives was carried out by Ryazan police’s engineering department. Their detectors showed that the bags contained hexogen. The detonating fuse was made with an electric clock set to set off at 5.30am and contained a shell from a shotgun filled with gunpowder. That same day, local FSB officers created and published composite pictures of the suspects and soon identified and arrested them. But those who planted the bombs turned out to be... Moscow FSB officers! On 25<sup>th</sup> September, the head of the FSB Nikolai Patrushev appeared on television with a startling statement: No terrorist attack had been foiled in Ryazan – “it was a training exercise. It was sugar. There were no explosives. Ryazan was not the only city where the training was carried out.” Soon after, the FSB apologized to the people of Ryazan for its “training exercise” during which citizens experienced “psychological trauma”.

But the Ryazyan authorities maintained that whether it was a training exercise or not, the explosives were real.

### **There were reports that “Basayev and the Kremlin made a deal”**

This story, which openly contradicted official statements (that the terrorist acts in Moscow were committed by Chechen terrorists as revenge for their defeat in Dagestan), was first aired on the morning of 16<sup>th</sup> September, a few hours before the explosion in Volgodonsk. *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* published an article with a sensational headline: “Was the Kremlin making bombs?”. With reference to an anonymous intelligence analyst, the article claimed that “together with the commonly accepted story [that Chechens wanting to avenge state operations in Dagestan were behind the Moscow bombings], a series of bizarre scenarios have been considered”. Specifically, “just three hours after the first bombing on Kashirskoye Highway, it was suggested that Chechen mujahidin had nothing to do with the terrorist acts in the capital. Over time, there is more and more evidence to support this”.

According to the anonymous analyst, “simulating an attack similar to the two explosions in Moscow proves that terrorists would have needed between four and four and a half months to plan them”. But “during that time, even if the Chechens were indeed planning to invade Dagestan, they would have only been in the very early stages”. This leads to the conclusion that the terrorist acts in the capital could not have resulted from the situation in Dagestan or in Chechnya, meaning the Moscow explosions could have been the work of the FSB. The Main Directorate for Special Programs of the President of the Russian Federation (GUSP), which the article mentions, could have played a role. A part of the GUSP is “the former 15<sup>th</sup> division of the KGB which operates the underground bunkers for top public officials in case of war. The experts from this division... know how to work with explosives. Furthermore, the administration is a “pocket” presidential intelligence agency subordinate only to the head of state”.

The material unambiguously claimed that “the terrorist acts in Moscow were almost certainly carried out by professionals”. In addition, the anonymous analysts put forward the idea that “it could have been done by men hired by the Russian security services”. Naturally, the President’s spokesman Dmitry Yakushkin was quick to announce that “any suggestion of the Kremlin’s involvement in the explosion is absolutely monstrous”.

Several hours later, there was an explosion in Volgodonsk. The fact that the city is so close to the North Caucasus supported the version that the bombings were a terrorist response to events in Chechnya.

On 29<sup>th</sup> September 1999, after the “FSB training exercise” in Ryazyan, the governor of the Siberian Krasnoyarsk region - General Aleksandr Lebed - gave an interview to the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. Lebed suggested that the bombings in Moscow and other cities could have been organized by the federal authorities with the aim of destabilizing Russia. “The President and ‘the family’ are isolated”, he said, “they have absolutely no political force to win the elections. Facing a desperate situation, the government has only one way out: to destabilize the situation with

the aim of cancelling the elections”. Lebed also expressed confidence that “Basayev and the authorities had a deal”:

“Chechen commanders would not hesitate to blow up Russian commanders, or hit the FSB, army depots or nuclear centers to take revenge. But they would never attack innocent people. The Kremlin’s aim is to incite mass terror, destabilize the situation and then say: ‘You should not go to vote as there is a risk of being blown up together with the ballot boxes’. I suppose that an agreement with Basayev exists, especially as he is a former KGB informer”.

During a press conference in Cheboksary, the capital of the Chuvash Republic, Prime Minister Putin dismissed Lebed’s words as nonsense and accused him of “making a political career from blood”.

But Lebed was not the only one to voice this version of events – it fitted perfectly with the political realities of the time. The FSB’s narrative was too painfully obvious and even today remains full of inconsistencies.

### **The seven lives of Abu al-Walid**

The verdict delivered by a Moscow court on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2004 outlined the official version of the bombings. Adam Dekkushev and Yusuf Krymshankhalov – both ethnic Karachays – were the only people convicted of blowing up the apartment blocks in Moscow.

The court proceedings were closed. To this day, no investigative material or expert and witness statements are available. This means the text of the verdict is the best guide to the evidence given that day. The verdict – despite the names, dates and numbers – is not convincing. Yet, it’s more than likely that both suspects participated in organizing the terrorist act in Volgodonsk. Still, it is not clear how the incident in Volgodonsk is connected to those in Moscow. And, crucially, the question of who planned and organized the attacks – and with what aim – remains unanswered.

Initially, Shamil Basayev was pinpointed as the main organizer of the attacks. But Basayev always denied his involvement in the Moscow bombings. His interview with *Paris Match* magazine at the time was telling. Asked whether he took responsibility for the acts, Basayev snapped indignantly: “Why should I be responsible for those? Who benefits from those terrorist acts in the first place? The Russian government – in order to direct world public opinion against the Chechens. And to distract the Russian people who are wondering where the billions of dollars the IMF sent to the country have disappeared to. And those were not military bases that were blown up or the houses of people of influence – at least that would match our aims...”.

Naturally, we cannot trust Basayev. But the Ingush President at the time, Ruslan Aushev, also gave an interesting opinion: “For Basayev, there is no difference whether to take responsibility for 200 or 500 lives. His hands are covered in blood. He’s a wild animal, a criminal. He entered Dagestan, killing civilians. What would it be for him to assume responsibility for the terrorist acts he carried out? But he still claimed it wasn’t him”. (*Kommersant*, 12<sup>th</sup> November 1999)

In the verdict of Dekkushev's and Krymshamhkalov's trial, Basayev's name was not mentioned either. The organizers of the bombings were called "foreigners": Amir al-Khattab, Abu al-Walid, Abu Umar and Abu Jafar. Why? Perhaps because, at the time, Basayev was alive and well - and quite willing to give interviews. The "foreigners", however, could not give any interviews as officially they were all dead. Khattab was reported killed on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2002, Abu Umar on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2001, Abu Jafar on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2001, and Abu Walid on an unknown date. But the authorities were mistaken about Abu Walid. In May 2002, Abu Walid was reported to have been killed by the General Prosecutor's Office. But the headquarters of the combined forces in the North Caucasus were surprised by this claim - and said that, in all likelihood, he was alive. In the summer of 2002, the authorities claimed that Abu Walid had drowned. In autumn of the same year, Abu Walid was reported to have been seen in Turkey. After the "Nord-Ost" theater siege in October 2002, Abu Walid was spotted in Chechnya - after which authorities again claimed that he had died. Even though Abu Walid actually 'died' on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2004, in the short period between his numerous deaths and reappearances Abu Walid never denied his deaths publicly: he was too busy for that.

### **"Some organization has worked here"**

No reasonable answer was given as to why the bombings happened in the first place. Was it revenge for defeat in Dagestan? Maybe, but if the terrorists wanted to fight back why didn't they lift a finger when Russian bombs and missiles began to destroy their villages? And what does 'defeat' even mean? Can a month or so of resistance by a small, irregular terrorist band against a regular army be called 'a defeat'? For more than a month, the Russian Army - with their special forces, tanks, artillery and aviation - were unable to cope with an insignificant (in military terms) number of people armed only with light weapons. And someone in the Kremlin dares to call this the "terrorists' defeat" and their own victory? For such "defeats", partisan commanders of the Great Patriotic War were decorated as "Heroes of the Soviet Union"!

The timing was not right to be talking about a link between the terrorist acts and military action in the North Caucasus. The first explosion in Moscow, on the night of 9<sup>th</sup> September, happened while the fighting was still taking place. But how much time would the terrorists have needed to organize their 'revenge'? Not hours or days, but months.

It simply does not add up. How many people do you need to carry out an operation like "Circassia sugar"? Two or three are not enough. People have to be selected, trained, embedded, given accommodation, provided with cover. They had to make explosives, transport them, store them for some time, prepare them accordingly and place them in the basements of apartment blocks. They had to calculate the explosive capacity, place the bomb strategically so that the explosion would destroy the entire building. This was not the work of an amateur. It is much easier to park a car with explosives next to a target - as was done in Buynaksk and Volgodonsk. But in Moscow, for some reason, the tactics were far more complicated. They were "complicated" because the risk of being caught was much higher. Terrorists had to pick targets, rent the relevant basements, work out the plan in detail and organize the delivery of the explosives. Setting the fuse is just one of the final steps - but not the final one. The most important thing for the terrorists - escaping to prearranged positions - had to be planned.



A whole other series of preparations had to be carried out, too. At least, to cover the mysterious figure of Laypanov – whose passport was used to rent the basements. The choice of the date and the calculations of all possible consequences – all of this work was carried out so faultlessly that it becomes clear it could not have been planned by one person. One can also marvel over the incredible cohesiveness of the operation, mastered so well that nothing failed.

Was it all pre-planned? Definitely. But in that case, it took months. So the set up was totally different. The “revenge” narrative is inconsistent: it’s impossible to seek revenge for something that hasn’t happened yet.

Alexander Litvinenko expressed a similar opinion in his book “The Gang From Lubyanka”: “Authorities claim that the Chechens carried out the attacks as revenge for their defeat in Dagestan. But very little time passed between the operation in Dagestan and the blowing up of the apartment blocks. Too little time! Four apartment blocks were blown up and hundreds of kilograms of explosives were found and de-activated in other buildings. About a year is needed to bring this amount of hexogen to Moscow... Blowing up a building can be organized in a day – if everything you need is at your disposal. If you have nothing – you have to hire someone. These could be members of the law enforcement agencies. Then these people have to be trained. You need time for that. You have to prepare the site of the explosion, bring the explosives, make the bomb...”.

Journalist Akram Murtazaev asked Litvinenko if the time needed to plan these attacks was closer to three or four months. “Yes. All the more so because at the time military operations were going on in Dagestan. Khattab and Basayev, who were fighting on the frontline, could not have cared less about these explosions. It was only later that they might have sat down and thought: hey, we lost, let’s take revenge... Four apartment blocks? Within a month? And in different cities – Moscow, Buynaksk, Volgograd? And two apartments in Moscow where the bombs were de-activated just in time. Complete nonsense. An organization did this”. (Later Alexander Litvinenko and Yury Felshinsky put forward the narrative that the FSB were involved in the 1999 apartment bombings in the book “Blowing up Russia”).

Even supposing that the group was sent in advance, it’s impossible to believe that the intelligence agencies would not have heard about the plot via their channels and networks. But if they did not, does it mean the FSB intentionally disregarded Moscow’s Chechen community? A group of Chechens with no contacts could not have lived in the capital for months, rented a flat, looked for suitable basements, rented them, and covered their activities while escaping the close attention of the Chechen criminal world.

### **A deadly topic**

As early as autumn 1999, there were reports that none of the apartment blocks were home to any government worker, member of the security services or army officer. It was as if the apartments had been systematically sorted, carefully chosen so there were no “monarchic” men among the residents – especially from the defense and law enforcement agencies. It seems the location was chosen because the residents were simple Muscovites. The area is also interesting – to this day, no

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wealthy people live there. Such sorting can be carried out only with access to government databases. Besides, why would Chechen terrorists blow up innocent Russian citizens? It would be more logical for them to target “significant” places: after all, blowing up a state-owned building or an elite apartment block would have had far greater impact. What’s more, it would have been relatively easier to do it: no renting basements, no bringing “sugar”. A truck with explosives would have been enough.

One person who confused the official narrative was the Duma speaker Gennady Seleznev. On 13<sup>th</sup> September 1999, during a Duma sessions, Seleznev was handed a note, which he read out. The note related to the bombing in Volgodonsk. But the bombing in Volgodonsk had not happened yet – and it would not happen until 16<sup>th</sup> September! The issue was raised by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. A quote from the session’s records reads: “Recollect, Gennady Nikolaevich, you told us on Monday that the apartment block in Volgodonsk had been blown up. Three days before the explosion... The State Duma knew that the apartment block had been blown up on Monday, and it was blown up on Thursday... We In Moscow knew about the explosion three days before it had happened”, Zhirinovskiy complained, “and they (the authorities in Rostov) only woke up when everything had already blown up!”. Seleznev responded by denying Zhirinovskiy the right to speak for a month. At one point, the record of the State Duma session of 17<sup>th</sup> September 1999 was removed from public access.

Then there was the persecution of those who were directly involved in the events and those who tried to conduct investigations or expressed their opinion about the bombings. The so-called Social Committee began a series of private investigations. Formally headed by then Duma deputy Sergey Kovalev, the real drivers of the committee were Duma deputy Sergey Yushenkov and journalist (and Duma member) Yury Shchekochikhin. But on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2003, Yushenkov was shot and killed. Later the same year, on 3<sup>rd</sup> July, Shchekochikhin suddenly died – most likely poisoned with a radioactive isotope.

As far as it is known, a private investigation was carried out by the journalist Anna Politkovskaya – who was killed on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2006. On 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2006, Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned with radioactive polonium in London. On 9<sup>th</sup> July 2004, the editor of the Russian edition of *Forbes Magazine*, Paul Klebnikov – who also worked on the topic – was shot in Moscow. Sometime earlier, on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2002, General Alexander Lebed – who was probably the first person to suggest the bombings were the work of the FSB – was killed in a helicopter crash. Shamil Basayev, Khattab, Abu Walid, Abu Umar, Abu Jafar are all officially considered dead; Aslan Mashkhadov is also dead. On 31<sup>st</sup> May 2001, Admiral German Ugryumov – deputy head of the FSB who oversaw the Chechen campaign in 1999 – died (officially, of a heart attack). On 28<sup>th</sup> April 2000, a criminal warlord Maxim Lazovsky was killed outside Moscow. According to Alexander Litvinenko and Yury Felshtinsky, Lazovsky was an agent of one of the Russian intelligence agencies and was involved in the Moscow apartment bombings. All those named in the verdict of Dekkushev’s and Krymshamkhalov’s trial – Denis Saitakov, Timur and Zaur Bachaevs, Khakim Abaev, Ravil Akhmyarov and Mahomed Tsokiev – were considered killed either while being arrested or during a counterterrorist operation. A major figure in the verdict – Achemez Gochiyayev – disappeared without a trace.

## WHO'S BLOWING UP RUSSIA?

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Today, anyone who wants to begin a private investigation into the apartment bombings will be entangled in a web of lies. But one thing has to be acknowledged: the suggestion that the intelligence agencies were involved in the apartment bombings did not appear from nowhere. The official narrative offers no answers to the main question and remains unconvincing.



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