

Behind The Lines!

Winter 2013-2014

RUSSIAN "EXCEPTIONALISM" AND 2014

As greetings of С Новым Годом! (Happy New Year!) ring in 2014 and intense preparations proceed for the XXII Olympic Winter Games commencing in Sochi in February, anxiety hangs in the air for President Vladimir Putin as he continues his attempts to reshape the Russian domestic landscape.

The Olympic Games have become the centerpiece of Putin's efforts to enhance his personal image as well as restore Russia's prominence on the world stage. Several unexpected executive decisions during the waning days of 2013 were made for their obvious propaganda value and political effect. Just a few days apart in December, Putin released his political nemesis and Russian oil magnate, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, from a 10-year prison term along with two previously incarcerated female members of the punk rock group Pussy Riot. Then came the terrorist strikes that changed the entire calculus.

Russia's greatest nightmare in the volatile Caucasus is terrorist strikes and sabotage such as occurred this week in Volgograd. Doku Umarov, the self-proclaimed Chechen leader of the Kavkaz (Caucasus) Emirate who has been called "Russia's Osama Bin Laden," is Vladimir Putin's most feared nemesis in the region. Russian counterterrorist elements are operating in the area to frustrate and neutralize the terrorist threat.

Russia and the Islamic people who inhabit the Northern Caucasus have been at war literally for centuries. There are no indications that the relationship will improve under Putin, but instead political conditions will continue to deteriorate in the region as he seeks to control the Caucasus on his own terms. Contact between Russia and the "people from the East" extends at least as far back as the invading Mongol/Tartar hordes of the 1200s.

Historically, the Russians have an innate fear of a return of the "people from the East" (think Chinese as the modern day Mongols) and the "people from the Caucasus" (think Muslims encroaching from the south). And for good reason. The Muslim presence in contemporary Russia is an increasingly prominent one. Islam is second only to Russian Orthodoxy in terms of religion in Russia. Mosques are part of the Russian landscape, especially as one travels farther south from Moscow and to the Caucasus area. Demographics relate to this Russian concern as well. The dangerously low birth rate among Russians coupled with the extremely high birth rate among the Muslim population gives the Russian leadership strong reason for pause. Some demographers predict that Muslims in Russia will outnumber ethnic Russians within 50 years or so.

Does Russia have concerns about the expanding Muslim world? Most assuredly. Are the prospects encouraging for political stability in Russia for the long term? Probably not. So what is the main threat to Putin as he continues to promote Mother Russia as a unique and "exceptional" sovereign state juxtaposed between Europe and Asia? Growing nationalism. Especially among the restive young demographic. This volatile and vocal sentiment extends beyond Russia's borders to contiguous Ukraine and the neighboring Muslim population in particular. Time is not Putin's ally.