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In a new light

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When a suicide bomber blew himself up in the arrivals area of Moscow's Domodedovo airport this week, the world took notice of a conflict that rarely grabs headlines.

Monday's blast, which killed 35, was a grim reminder of a bloody civil war that has raged for more than a decade across a handful of mainly Muslim autonomous republics in Russia's mountainous south and periodically hits daily life in the country's capital.

It came as President Dmitry Medvedev was preparing to travel to Davos to display his modernising credentials and champion Russia's growth prospects to international investors. In the event, he arrived in the Swiss resort with the airport blast having pushed to the forefront the long-running tensions at home.

In towns and cities across the North Caucasus mountain range, a steady drumbeat of violence forms a backdrop to terrorist "spectaculars" such as the airport explosion or last year's bombing of the Moscow subway, which left 40 dead. Those incidents seem to strike annually at the heart of the nation. But the body count from this week's blast was equivalent to only about two weeks' average death toll in the conflict in the south.

Almost daily, shoot-outs take place there between federal forces and militants. Most months, dozens die in explosions. In 2010 the fighting killed 754 and injured more than 1,000, according to Caucasian Knot, an online news service used by experts. Seven died in a bombing at a theatre in Stavropol in June; a September blast at a market in North Ossetia killed 17; while in October militants invaded Chechnya's parliament in Grozny, provoking a street battle that killed six.

Police suspect the Domodedovo blast to have been the work of an Islamist terror group. They are focusing their investigation on Nogai Jamaat, thought to be made up mainly of Chechen refugees and based in Stavropolski Krai, the southern Russian region bordering Chechnya.

It is not so much the bombs themselves that are the problem. "Terrorism", said Mr Medvedev this week, "will not bring Russia to its knees." Such events can, however, prove an embarrassment and potentially an economic hindrance. They can also exacerbate already explosive ethnic tensions.

Following the Chechen civil wars of 1994-96 and 1999-2002, and the resulting wave of Islamist terror in Russian cities, ethnic conflict has grown increasingly acute. In December, rioting between Slavs and Muslim migrants broke out in Moscow after a football fan was killed in a brawl by a gang of Caucasian youths. Last

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month, racist skinhead gangs rioted in front of the Kremlin, attacking passers-by in the worst violence seen in the capital's centre in two decades.

The recent show of strength by Russia's ultranationalists has created a tactical bind for the Kremlin, which needs to appear tough on terror without throwing oil on the fire of ethnic conflict that could seriously threaten national stability. The bombings "are a result of the complete failure of Kremlin policy in the Caucasus, and an answer to what happened on Manezh square [outside the Kremlin] in December. And this will continue," says Alexei Malashenko at the Carnegie Moscow Center, a think-tank.

Since the end of heavy fighting in 2002, the Chechen war has mutated from a localised separatist war into a region-wide conflict that has engulfed the neighbouring republics of Ingushetia and Dagestan and threatens the wider region. Islamist groups, radicalised with help from foreign jihadists, comprise several hundred hardcore militants roaming the mountains with dreams of creating a caliphate in the southern Russian rim.

In an attempt to keep a lid on the region, Moscow has opted to cut deals with local strongmen such as Ramzan Kadyrov, president of the Chechen autonomous republic. His father was a rebel commander who made peace with Moscow in 1999 but was assassinated in 2004. Many cabinet and parliament members are former rebel chieftains, bought off with political power and cash. In exchange for stability, Moscow lets the leadership do much as it pleases. Laws are increasingly Islamicised, polygamy is tolerated and women who go out without covering their heads are frequently harassed.

Human rights in Chechnya are among the worst in the world. Torture by police is common. Some suspect that Mr Kadyrov is behind a number of murders of political rivals and campaigners. Natalia Estemirova, a human rights worker, was kidnapped near her home in 2009 and her body dumped across the border in Ingushetia. Oleg Orlov, chairman of Memorial, the human rights organisation for which Ms Estemirova worked, is being tried for defamation after he accused Mr Kadyrov of the murder.

But the main problem with strongmen, says one Grozny-based political scientist, is that they do not create the stability with which they are charged. "The clan-mafia model of political power is always creating opposition," he says. "And the only type of opposition which is possible here in the Caucasus is armed opposition. Nothing else here will survive. "The Kremlin cannot do like Eisenhower and say, 'He's a son of a bitch but he's our son of a bitch'. They need a flexible and more pragmatic approach."

With few prospects available to young adults in regions mainly isolated from the steady improvement in living standards elsewhere in Russia, many are migrating to Moscow and other big cities, increasing competition for jobs and housing and fuelling ethnic tension. Others have "gone to the forest", as villagers in the region put it, joining the resistance.

Moscow's strategy for bringing peace to Chechnya is quickly unravelling, according to Jim **Hughes**, an expert on the Caucasus at the London School of Economics. "Co-opting part of the resistance to crush the rest of the resistance is a classic imperial model which has never had a very long shelf life," he says. "That's why there are no empires left."

The seeds of a new approach were spotted in response to the bombing of the Moscow metro in March 2010, the work of two "black widows" - the Russian term for women whose husbands were killed by security forces, and who have been responsible for many of the worst terrorist attacks in the past decade.

During the presidency of Vladimir Putin, such violence was met with an iron fist. But Mr Medvedev decided to address underlying economic causes by tackling underdevelopment in the Caucasus. Gross domestic product per head in Chechnya is about \$1,800 a year, compared with \$10,000 in Russia.

The president has ordered Alexander Khloponin, his regional representative in southern Russia, to try to improve investment in the area. Moscow has also undertaken a programme of construction in Grozny, which in the mid-1990s following Russian carpet bombing resembled a lunar landscape. Today, the city compares favourably with Baghdad and Kabul, where US efforts to rebuild remain mostly on paper.

At Davos this week, Mr Medvedev unveiled a \$15bn plan to develop tourism in the region, leveraging Russia's winter Olympics in 2014 in Sochi, at the western edge of the Caucasus mountains, by building six other ski resorts. But experts say the solution is not to throw more money at the area. Though Moscow spent

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nearly Rbs52bn (\$1.8bn) in Chechnya in 2010 - roughly \$1,600 for every Chechen - poverty is still widespread. The problem is not the amount spent but the endemic corruption.

"All the money which is spent here has a very minimal effect because it simply goes into the pockets of the elite," says the Grozny academic.

There is a limit, however, to what the Kremlin can do to change the flawed model of how the Caucasus are run. "What is the threshold at which they decide that the investment they have made in Mr Kadyrov isn't working?" asks Mr **Hughes**. "And then, what is the alternative? Get a new strongman? How do they know he'll do a better job?"

With the Sochi Olympics approaching and the football World Cup to follow in 2018, Russia will be under considerable pressure to rein in the Islamist terrorism. The terrorists themselves see the events as an opportunity to do maximum damage when Russia is in the global spotlight.

The Kremlin, for its part, appears to be retreating from the war-like rhetoric that has followed previous attacks. In the wake of the Domodedovo blast, Mr Medvedev focused his remarks on improving security in transport infrastructure rather than on revenge. The signs are that Moscow is coming round to the view that there are some things it cannot change, of which the North Caucasus is one.

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