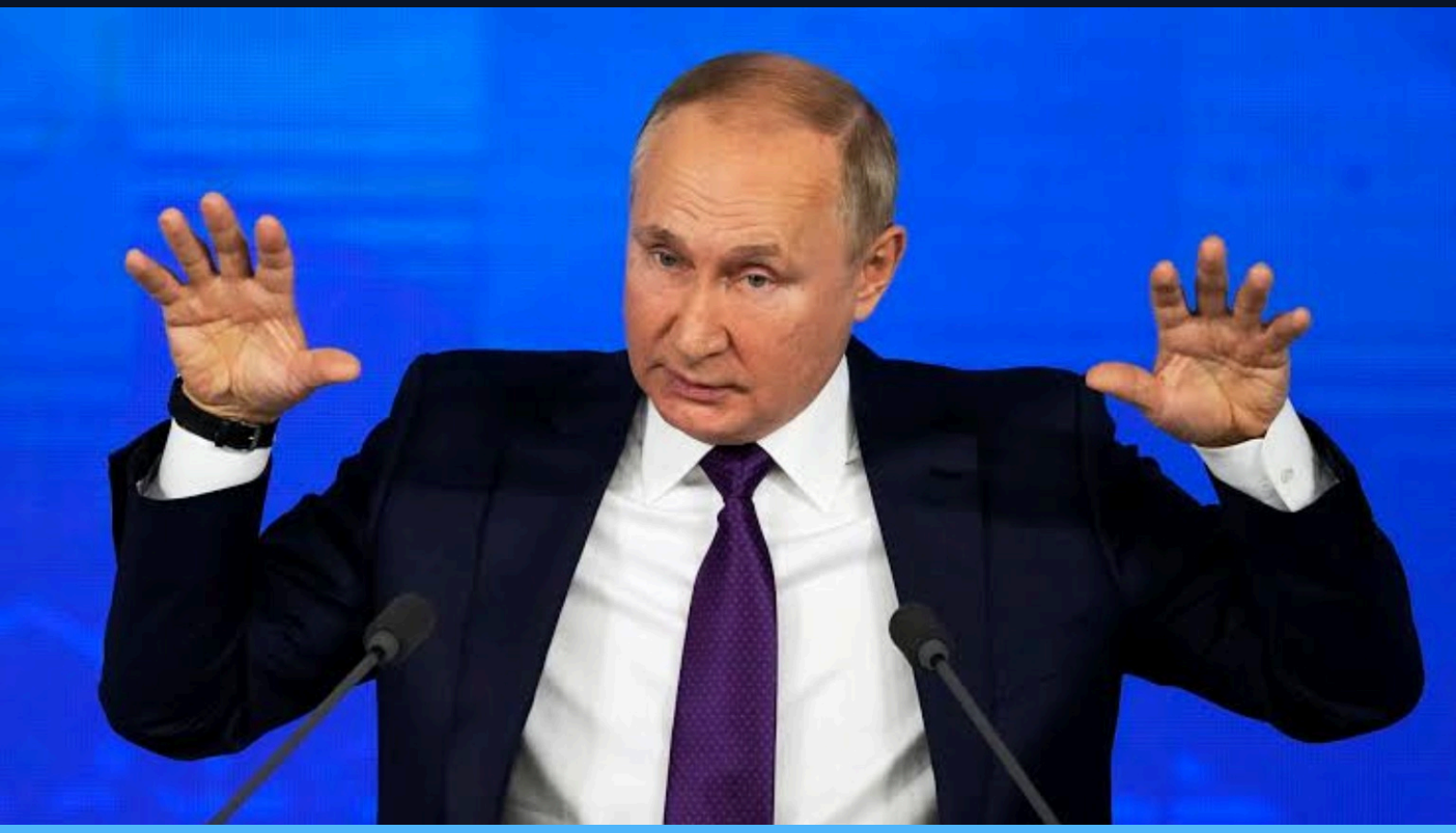
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THE POLITICS OF FEAR

VLADIMIR PUTIN, THE FSB AND THE CRISES THAT BUILT A SYSTEM OF POWER

How crises, security agencies and the politics of public fear became central to the rise and consolidation of Russia's presidency.

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Fear as a political resource

Vladimir Putin's rise to power took place amid an extraordinary succession of security crises. Armed incursions into Dagestan, the September 1999 apartment bombings and a renewed war against Chechnya transformed a little-known prime minister into the figure presented as the guarantor of Russia's survival. Later emergencies would be followed by further centralisation, greater authority for the security agencies and tighter control over information.

The events were not all alike. Some were terrorist atrocities; others were military choices made by the Russian state itself. **Their common political feature was the repeated conversion of fear into a justification for stronger executive power.** This pattern does not require the claim that the Kremlin manufactured every threat. It requires examining the narrative built around each event, the measures that followed and the institutions that gained power.

Central to that story is the Federal Security Service (FSB). Putin directed it from July 1998 to August 1999. Over the following decades the security establishment became an increasingly influential element of his political system. The distinction between the FSB's documented role in managing crises and allegations of involvement in creating particular crises must remain clear. [1][2]

Before Moscow: the Caucasian precedents

On 16 November 1996, an explosion destroyed part of an apartment building in Kaspiysk, Dagestan, killing dozens of residents, many of them relatives of Russian border guards. Another device was found in accommodation for naval officers in Kaspiysk in April 1997. In May 1999, explosions struck residential buildings associated with the Russian military at Sputnik, near Vladikavkaz. Then, on 4 September, a truck bomb devastated an apartment building in Buynaksk, Dagestan. [3][4]

These episodes shared the deliberate targeting of residential space, though the explosive devices, targets and scale of destruction were not identical. No publicly established forensic comparison proves a single team carried them out.

Their investigative histories are revealing. In October 1999 Interfax reported that the Dagestani FSB had detained seven suspects in the 1996 Kaspiysk case; among the named suspects were police and railway officials. No conclusive convictions for that atrocity have been established in the public record examined here. In the Sputnik case, Russian investigators linked the convicted perpetrators to a militant network allegedly associated with Ibn al-Khattab, whose name later appeared in the official account of the Moscow bombings. These are leads, not proof of a shared clandestine command. [5][6]

The geography matters: Dagestan, Ingushetia and neighbouring North Ossetia were zones where militant networks, federal forces, local police and informal economies intersected. Such contact created opportunities for intelligence gathering and, potentially, corruption. It does not by itself establish complicity.

ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPH | Moscow apartment bombing aftermath, 14 September 1999
Oleg Lastochkin / RIA Novosti; CC BY-SA 3.0

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1999: from crisis to political succession

On 7 August 1999, fighters led by Shamil Basayev and Ibn al-Khattab entered Dagestan from Chechnya. On 9 August President Boris Yeltsin appointed Putin prime minister and publicly presented him as a possible successor. Until that moment Putin had headed the FSB. The incursion was real, but it was not entirely unforeseen: warnings of militant preparations had circulated before August. [7]

In September, apartment buildings exploded in Buynaksk, Moscow and Volgodonsk. Hundreds died. In Moscow, ordinary people were killed while sleeping in their homes; terror was no longer geographically confined to the Caucasus. Russia's authorities blamed Islamist militant networks based in or connected with Chechnya. Courts later convicted several defendants, including Adam Dekkushev and Yusuf Krymshamkhalov. **No judicial finding established that President Aslan Maskhadov or the institutions of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria ordered those bombings.** [8]

Russian forces intensified their air campaign against Chechnya; Grozny came under attack on 23 September, and a large-scale ground offensive began on 30 September. The bombings provided a powerful political justification for the new war, while the distinction between armed extremists and Ichkeria's government was increasingly blurred in Russian public messaging. [9]

The political effects were immediate. Declassified US diplomatic reporting describes Putin's initially very low support and its extraordinary growth as the war developed. Yeltsin resigned on 31 December 1999; Putin became acting president and won the March 2000 election. The economy, elite negotiations and state television also mattered. Yet the security crisis was central to the political image through which Putin rose. [1]

ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPH | Putin at his presidential inauguration, 7 May 2000
Vladimir Rodionov / Kremlin.ru; CC BY 4.0

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Ryazan: where the questions remain

On 22 September 1999, residents in Ryazan reported suspicious activity in the basement of an apartment building. Police evacuated the inhabitants and initially treated the discovery as a potential bombing attempt. On 24 September FSB director Nikolai Patrushev said the incident had been a security exercise involving bags of sugar. The FSB's participation in the operation is undisputed; the true purpose and handling of the incident remain disputed. [10]

Investigators and authors including David Satter and Aleksandr Litvinenko argued that Ryazan raised the possibility of secret-service involvement in the bombings. Others, including a later academic reassessment by Dylan Payne Royce, dispute the claim that a real bomb was present. An independent judicial finding establishing that the FSB organised the Moscow bombings does not exist. [10][11]

This uncertainty must not be mistaken for proof of either side. It does, however, make independent scrutiny of the agency's actions, prior intelligence, operational chains of command and subsequent investigations an enduring historical necessity.

The security state becomes the governing state

Putin's subsequent presidency saw a striking expansion of the political influence of the *siloviki*: officials whose careers developed in intelligence, law enforcement and the armed forces. Political scientist Brian D. Taylor documents how the coercive agencies rose in stature under Putin, while cautioning against treating the entire state as one undifferentiated security-service hierarchy. [2]

Information control became part of the same architecture. In 2001 Gazprom-Media took control of NTV, previously a major independent national television broadcaster. The Committee to Protect Journalists described the takeover as a serious blow to press freedom. Control over the dominant channels of information gave the government greater capacity to define threats, foreground some explanations and marginalise competing accounts. [12]

Beslan marked another decisive moment. In September 2004 militants seized a school in North Ossetia, and more than 330 people died. Shamil Basayev claimed responsibility for organising the assault. In 2017 the European Court of Human Rights found grave Russian failures in prevention and in the operation to end the siege. Yet immediately after the tragedy, Putin announced reforms that ended the direct popular election of regional governors, giving the presidency a decisive role in their selection. **An appalling failure of security was followed by a further concentration of political authority.** [13][14]

In February 2006 a presidential decree established the National Anti-Terrorism Committee, chaired by the FSB director. The agency Putin had once headed thereby occupied an institutional centre of the state's response to terrorism. This did not make the FSB the only source of power in Russia; it did entrench security institutions in the machinery of government. [15]

ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPH | Memorial at Beslan School No. 1, September 2004
Office of US Congressman Tom Tancredo; public domain

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A recurring political grammar: 2014, 2022 and 2024

In 2014 Moscow framed intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea through claims about the protection of Russian speakers and Russia's security. The seizure and annexation violated Ukraine's sovereignty, but generated a powerful patriotic mobilisation inside Russia: Putin's approval rose sharply, according to Gallup and Russian polling analyses. [16]

In February 2022 Russia itself initiated the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin described the war as an urgent response to external threats. At home, March 2022 legislation criminalised independent reporting about the armed forces, with penalties reaching fifteen years' imprisonment in specified circumstances. In this instance the emergency was inseparable from the government's own decision to wage war. [17]

After the March 2024 massacre at Crocus City Hall near Moscow, Islamic State claimed responsibility and US intelligence attributed the attack to the group's Afghan affiliate. Russian officials nevertheless advanced claims of a Ukrainian connection without independently substantiated evidence. The dispute again illustrated how a real terrorist atrocity could be fitted into an existing wartime narrative. [18]

These events do not share one cause, nor do they demonstrate one hidden operation. What recurs is the political sequence: **a security shock; an official account of existential danger; a forceful presidential response; and a narrower space for institutional or public challenge.**

ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPH | War damage in Irpin, Ukraine, April 2022
Oleksandr Ratushniak; CC BY-SA 4.0

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The unresolved question — and the documented conclusion

Could individual officials, informants or criminal networks have helped prepare, facilitate or fail deliberately to prevent some of the 1990s bombings? It remains a legitimate line of inquiry. The Kaspiysk investigation, the official attribution of some 1999 attacks to militants associated with Khattab, and the acknowledged FSB operation in Ryazan justify checking names, communications and operational records. But none of this proves a common FSB-directed network behind Kaspiysk, Sputnik and Moscow.

The broader political conclusion requires no such leap. **Putin's authority was repeatedly reinforced by crises presented as tests of national survival, while the security agencies acquired a durable place at the centre of Russian political power.** The presidency strengthened the security apparatus; that apparatus helped make the presidency more capable of surveillance, coercion and control. Media concentration enabled the state to influence how emergencies were interpreted.

The essential issue is not whether one conspiracy explains three decades of Russian history. It is how an increasingly centralised political system learned to draw legitimacy from danger — and why, even when the state's security institutions failed to protect the public, the answer so often became to give those institutions still more power.

Putin's system does not need to have created every threat in order to derive power from the fear of those threats.

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