

# From Chechnya to Syria: The Evolution of Russia's Counter-Terrorist Policy



**Pavel BAEV**

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# *Russie.Nei.Visions*

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- “Russia and Central and Eastern Europe: Between Confrontation and Collusion”, *Russie.Nei.Reports*, No. 97, Ifri, November 2016.

# Abstract

The struggle against terrorism is supposed to be one part of security policy in which Russia has every necessary capability and much experience; yet, it is a major weakness in the country's still uncertain state-building. Russia is facing growing threats from both home-grown and international terrorism, but its counter-terrorist policy, instead of deterring these threats, generates more security challenges on the domestic front and new tensions in relations with the West, in particular with the European Union (EU). The Russian leadership keeps trying to convince the US administration, the EU and the key European states to engage in cooperation in counter-terrorism, focusing primarily on the threats generated by the evolving war in Syria. It is, however, difficult to find value-added in such cooperation, as critically important as the problem is. The aim of Russian intervention in Syria is to ensure the survival of the al-Assad regime, a goal which is incompatible with the US and European policies of combining the fight with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) with relief for the humanitarian disaster. In the untangling of terrorist networks, in the investigation of illegal financial flows, and in the combatting of extremist propaganda, Russia is at best non-cooperative.

# Summary

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# Introduction

The struggle against terrorism is supposed to be one part of security policy in which Russia has every necessary capability and know-how, and its special services can draw on vast experience without encountering the legal and institutional constraints that often interfere with Western efforts. Yet, instead of strength, counter-terrorism is a major weakness in the country's still uncertain state-building. Relative stability in the North Caucasus is eroding, St Petersburg was shocked by its first terrorist attack on 3 April 2017, Western condemnation of Russia's intervention in Syria has gained new momentum, and the expectations in the Kremlin for building cooperative counter-terrorist ties with the Trump administration have been disappointed. Russia is facing growing threats from both home-grown and international terrorism, and its counter-terrorist policy, instead of deterring these threats, generates more security challenges on the domestic front and new tensions in relations with the West, in particular with the EU.

The Russian leadership certainly takes the terrorist threat seriously and puts a heavy propaganda spin on its sustained efforts to exterminate various terrorist groups and networks. President Vladimir Putin obviously expected that the build-up of law-enforcement structures facilitated by generous allocation of resources would secure a convincing victory in his fight against terror, which he started back in autumn 1999 before his first presidential campaign. This victory has failed to materialize; instead, the suicide explosion in St Petersburg proved that the spectre of terrorism was making a comeback. The dangerous mutation of domestic threats adds new urgency to the proposition for making joint efforts in counter-terrorism into a key avenue of Russia's cooperation with the West, exempt from the confrontation that has become the prevalent trend since the start of the Ukraine crisis in spring 2014. What stands in the way of such cooperation is not only the deliberate mix-up of the goals of countering terrorism and the alleged aggressiveness of NATO in Russian doctrinal documents, but also the centrality of the Syrian intervention in Russia's stance in the struggle against terrorism. Indeed, cooperation in counter-terrorism was supposed to be one of the key issues in the meeting with Putin initiated by

newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron in late May 2017.<sup>1</sup> Putin also discussed it with Marine Le Pen, when she paid a visit to Moscow on her electoral trail in March.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, Macron and Putin found scant common ground, and disagreements over Syria as well as human rights violations in Russia actually came to the forefront of that tense conversation.<sup>3</sup>

This report aims to evaluate the shortcomings and distortions in Russian counter-terrorist policy which have determined the current domestic disarray and international censure in dealing with the threat of terrorism. It starts by examining the trajectory of this struggle on the domestic front, focusing particularly on the North Caucasus and on Moscow. It then identifies the counter-terrorist elements in two ongoing Russian military campaigns: in Eastern Ukraine and in Syria. The prospects for and obstacles to establishing cooperation between Russia and the USA as well as with the EU in the struggle against terrorism are evaluated in the final part. The conclusion summarizes the reasons for the newly growing terrorist threat to Russia and the limitations in developing a common anti-terrorist agenda with the West.

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1. "Macron, Putin Prioritise Fight Against Terrorism in 'Frank' Talks", RFI, 29 May 2017, <http://en.rfi.fr>.

2. E. DuVall, "Le Pen, Putin Talk Terrorism in Surprise Kremlin Meeting", UPI, 24 March 2017, [www.upi.com](http://www.upi.com).

3. C. Dickey, "Macron Gets under Putin's Skin, Shows Up Trump", *The Daily Beast*, 29 May 2017, [www.thedailybeast.com](http://www.thedailybeast.com).

# Nothing Is Quiet on the Domestic Front

Russia has a uniquely rich history in facing domestic terrorism, which reached a peak in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in St Petersburg (1881), and his son, the Grand Duke Sergey, in Moscow (1905).<sup>4</sup> The Soviet Union added a unique legacy of staging public trials of key political opponents to Josef Stalin, who were accused of espionage and terrorism, as well as the legacy of the execution of thousands of Red Army officers on similar charges without a shred of evidence.<sup>5</sup> It is quite remarkable in this context that the collapse of the USSR, chaotic as it was in the centre and violent in many hot spots in the periphery, was essentially terrorism-free. The first decade of the new Russian state saw a shockingly deep economic crisis and much armed violence, including the use of tanks against the mutinous parliament in October 1993, but very little terrorism as such. It was the transformation of violent conflicts in the North Caucasus that, by the start of the new century, generated the deadly and sustained threat of terrorist attacks. This threat has evolved considerably and, during the two weeks of the flawless Sochi Olympics in February 2014, it appeared effectively contained; yet, as of mid-2017, it is looming ominously again. In a macabre replay, this threat has once again been exploited so as to launch a renewed political mobilization aimed at ensuring that Putin retains the position of supreme power for another six years.<sup>6</sup>

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4. This important precursor to modern-day terrorism is examined in M. A. Miller, "Entangled Terrorisms in Late Imperial Russia", in: R. D. Low (ed.), *The Routledge History of Terrorism*, Abington & NY: Routledge, 2015. See also M. Y. Omelicheva, "Russia's Counterterrorism Policy: Variation on the Imperial Theme", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 3, No. 1, 2009, [www.terrorismanalysts.com](http://www.terrorismanalysts.com).

5. One useful source on the extermination of the top brass is P. Whitewood, *The Red Army and the Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Soviet Military*, Lawrence KA: University Press of Kansas, 2015. An interesting reflection on the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mikhail Tukhachevsky's execution is K. Alexandrov, "Konets Marshala" [The Marshal's end], *The New Times*, 5 June 2017, <http://newtimes.ru>.

6. This parallel was not lost on many Russian opposition media; see, for instance, A. Ryklin, "Terakt v Pitere. Net sposoba vyiasnit' pravdu" [Terrorist Attack in Piter: No Way to Find the Truth], *Ezhednevnyj Zhurnal*, 4 April 2017, <http://ej.ru>.



## Doctrines, mechanisms, and bureaucratic squabbles

The struggle against terrorism has profoundly affected many Russian state institutions, and is codified in many doctrinal documents and in legislation, albeit vaguely, incoherently and controversially. The National Security Strategy (NSS) approved by Putin on 31 December 2015 describes the “activity of terrorist and extremist organizations” as the second in the list of threats to state and public security, after the “intelligence and other activities of special services of foreign states” and before the “activities of radical groupings” (Article 43).<sup>7</sup> Describing the recent changes in the terrorist threat, this document points to the “practice of overthrowing legitimate political regimes”, and claims that “the emergence of the terrorist organization proclaiming itself ‘Islamic state’ and the strengthening of its influence resulted from the policy of double standards pursued by some states in the area of struggle against terrorism” (Article 18). The NSS also goes to great lengths in describing the threat to Russia’s security coming from NATO’s “global functions”, indicating that there is little doubt that the US and NATO have contributed to the emergence of ISIS (*Daesh*). This alleged interconnection between the threat of terrorism and the danger to Russia’s security from the hostile West is confirmed and elaborated in several other basic documents approved since the start of the Ukraine crisis, including the Military Doctrine (December 2014) and the Foreign Policy Concept (November 2016).

The federal law “On the struggle against terrorism” was approved back in 1998, and is supplemented by the law “On countering extremist activity” (2002), but the practice of implementation of both has been recently significantly altered by the introduction of a “package” of legislation that prescribes tougher punishment for terrorism and extremism and increases the state’s surveillance capabilities.<sup>8</sup> International commentary has focused on particular features of this legislation; for

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7. There is no official translation; see “Ukaz Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federatsii ot 31 dekabnja 2015 goda No. 683 ‘O Strategii natsional’noj bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federatsii” [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of December 31, 2015 No. 683 “On the National security strategy of the Russian Federation”], 31 December 2015 *Rossijskaia Gazeta*, 31 December 2015, <https://rg.ru>. A useful analysis can be found in: I. Facon, *Russia’s National Security Strategy and Military Doctrine and Their Implications for the EU*, European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies, January 2017, [www.europarl.europa.eu](http://www.europarl.europa.eu).

8. The strategic documents and federal laws are collected on the Russian Security Council website, [www.scrf.gov.ru](http://www.scrf.gov.ru). On the introduction of the new “package”, see “Putin Signs Contentious Counterterrorism Legislation”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 7 July 2016, [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org).

instance, the ban on the work of Jehovah's Witnesses or the criminalization of sharing posts on social networks.<sup>9</sup> What is of prime importance, however, is the delegitimization and prosecution of most forms of expressing disagreement with state policies, so that protest is to all practical purposes equated with extremism and terrorism.

Russia's struggle against the terrorist threat is supposed to be directed by the National Anti-Terrorist Committee (NAC), created in 2006 and expanded by a presidential decree in 2012.<sup>10</sup> This inter-agency structure grants the leading role in this struggle to the Federal Security Service (FSB), and its director Alexander Bortnikov is the NAC chairman, while the Minister of the Interior Vladimir Kolokoltsev is deputy chairman, and the minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu, the Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the External Intelligence Service (SVR) director Sergey Naryshkin, and the Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov are just ranking members. Despite the high profile of this super-structure, the Kremlin is represented only by the deputy head of the presidential administration Aleksei Gromov, and the Security Council by deputy secretary Sergey Vahrukov.<sup>11</sup> NAC compiles the list of terrorist organizations, which currently includes 27 entries, of which 23 are radical Islamic groups and networks.<sup>12</sup>

Formally, NAC functions smoothly and holds regular meetings every two months, organized by the chief of staff Igor Sirotkin, who is also a deputy director of the FSB.<sup>13</sup> In fact, however, the FSB wages a constant and escalating turf war, and has launched a series of attacks on the Ministry of Interior and the Investigations Committee with the ambition of

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9. A. Higgins, "Russia Moves to Ban Jehovah's Witnesses as 'Extremist'", *The New York Times*, 4 April 2017, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com); P. R. Gregory, "Under Russia's New Extremist Laws, Liking my Writings on Ukraine Could Mean Jail Terms", *Forbes*, 29 August 2016, [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com).

10. The NAC's organization and current activities are presented on its well-designed and updated website, <http://nac.gov.ru>. See also "Sistema protivodejstvia terrorizmu slozhilas' v Rossii pod egidoj NAK" [The counterterrorism system in Russia has developed under the NAC], RIA-Novosti, 10 March 2016, <https://ria.ru>.

11. At its latest annual press conference on 31 January 2017, the NAC asserted that there had been a steady decline in terrorist attacks in Russia, and reported the killing of more than 140 terrorists and the arrest of more than 900 terrorists and accomplices in 2016. See "V Rossii za god likvidirovano bolee 140 terroristov" [More than 140 terrorists eliminated in Russia in the year], RIA-Novosti, 31 January 2017, <https://ria.ru>.

12. The list includes the Muslim Brotherhood on a par with ISIS, the Taliban, and Al Qaeda, but excludes Hezbollah and Hamas, <http://nac.gov.ru>.

13. Little information about these meetings is published. They are typically illustrated by 12-15 pictures; see for instance "V Moskve proshlo zasedanie Natsional'nogo antiterroristicheskogo komiteta" [A meeting of the National Anti-Terrorism Committee was held in Moscow], National Anti-Terrorist Committee, 8 August 2017, <http://nac.gov.ru>.

rebuilding a superstructure modelled on the Soviet KGB.<sup>14</sup> The dominance of the FSB in these squabbles is undermined by its exposure to the unfolding scandal of interference in the 2016 US elections, which has already caused a severe reshuffle at its Information Security Center.<sup>15</sup> It is now impossible for the US and European security services to cooperate with the compromised FSB.

The FSB preponderance in countering terrorism was curtailed in April 2016, when the National Guard was created rather suddenly by Putin's decree, and entrusted to Victor Zolotov, who for many years had been the chief of the Presidential Security Service (SBP).<sup>16</sup> Its mission in ensuring state and public security is defined very broadly; tasks related to combatting terrorism as well as to suppressing protests are included in its mandate. Accordingly, both special "rapid response" units (SOBR, 87 regional units employing 5,200 officers) and special "crowd control" units (OMON, 160 regional units employing 40,000 men) are transferred from the Interior Ministry to this ersatz gendarmerie, with a total strength of over 350,000.<sup>17</sup> Zolotov isn't content with this force structure, and is lobbying for a transfer under his command of the General Administration for Combatting Extremism (known as "Centre E") from the Interior Ministry, and for placing military units under the National Guard command in emergency situations.<sup>18</sup> The FSB leadership is not at all enthusiastic about this addition to the list of "armed bureaucracies", so Zolotov, despite his particular connection with Putin, was denied a permanent seat at the Security Council and remains just a ranking member of the NAC.<sup>19</sup> His ability to build an efficient command structure from a

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14. Plans for such a reform were leaked in autumn 2016, but there has been no progress since; see S. Operov, I. Safronov, "Ministerstvo chrezvychajnykh polnomochij: Gotovitsia reforma pravookhranitel'nykh i silovykh struktur" [Ministry of Extraordinary Authority: The Reform of Law Enforcement and Security Agencies Is Being Prepared], *Kommersant*, 19 September 2016 [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).

15. A. Knight, "Putin's Intelligence Crisis", *New York Review of Books*, 3 February 2017, [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).

16. On the background of that decision: I. Rozhdestvenski, A. Mihailova, and F. Rustamova, "Armiia Zolotova: zachem i kakim obrazom sozdaiotsia Natsional'naia gvardiia" [Zolotov's Army: Why and How Is the National Guard Being Created], RBK, 5 April 2016, [www.rbc.ru](http://www.rbc.ru).

17. One useful evaluation is: M. Galeotti, "National Guard: The Watchdog That Could Break the Leash", Raamop Rusland, 14 August 2017, [www.raamoprusland.nl](http://www.raamoprusland.nl).

18. A. Shvarev, "Rosgvardii dobaviat polnomochij" [National Guard Will Be Given More Power], Rosbalt, 14 March 2017, [www.rosbalt.ru](http://www.rosbalt.ru). On the tensions with the military, A. Golts, "Rosgvardiia podminaet genshtab" [The National Guard Prevails over the General Staff], *New Times*, 5 June 2017, <https://newtimes.ru>.

19. The Russian Security Council includes all top state officials and is run by its secretary, Nikolai Patrushev, former director of the FSB. On the squabbles between *siloviki*, M. Galeotti, "Putin's Hydra: Inside Russia's Intelligence Services", *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), May 2016, [www.ecfr.eu](http://www.ecfr.eu).

motley assortment of professional and conscript units is not proven as yet, and every setback in meeting a terrorist attack or suppressing a street riot is certain to be exploited by the FSB and other rivals. The intensity of turf battles is set to grow as the supply of funding gets tight, and Putin's propensity to cadre-reshuffling in the run-up to elections adds to the anxiety in the high echelons of *siloviki* bureaucracies.<sup>20</sup> As the threat of terrorism is increasing and social discontent is expanding, the capacity for containing these challenges is eroding—and the rationale for mixing them up is growing counter-productive.

## Wars and “pacification” in Chechnya and the North Caucasus

The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 generally followed the borders of its constituent republics. One of the fateful exceptions was the secession of Chechnya from the newly independent Russian Federation. President Boris Yeltsin committed perhaps the gravest mistake of his leadership by ordering in late 1994 a military operation aimed at eliminating this anomaly. The resulting First Chechen War lasted until the Khasavyurt Accord of August 1996, which paved the way for the peace treaty signed in Moscow on 12 May 1997.<sup>21</sup> The chance to build an independent Chechen state was lost amidst escalating chaotic violence from both sides, including the murder of six Red Cross workers in Novye Atagi on 17 December 1996.<sup>22</sup> In summer 1999, Shamil Basayev, a notorious Chechen warlord, who led the terrorist attack on the Budennovsk hospital in June 1995, launched an invasion of some 2,000 rebels into neighboring Dagestan, seeking to establish an Islamic state in the mountainous area, where Imam Shamil started the war against the Russian empire back in the 1830s.<sup>23</sup> The Russian army succeeded in expelling the rebels only with strong support from the Dagestani militia, but that clash triggered the hostilities that escalated into the Second Chechen War.<sup>24</sup>

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20. T. Stanovaia, “Transformatsiia putinskikh elit: 2014–2024” [The Transformation of Putin's Elites: 2014–2024], *Moskovskij Tsentr Karnegi*, 26 July 2017, <http://carnegie.ru>.

21. One of the best sources on that war is still A. Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998.

22. This terrorist act was never investigated; R. Boyes, “Russian Secret Squad Killed Red Cross Staff in Chechnya”, *The Times*, 24 November 2010, [www.thetimes.co.uk](http://www.thetimes.co.uk).

23. E. Souleimanov, “Chechnya, Wahhabism and the Invasion of Dagestan”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 9, No. 4, December 2005, pp. 48-71.

24. One useful early analysis was M. Evangelista, “Dagestan and Chechnya: Russia's Self-Defeating Wars”, *PONARS Memo* 95, October 1999, [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org). My response can be found in: P. K. Baev, “Will Russia Go For a Military Victory in Chechnya?”, *PONARS Memo* 107, February 2000, [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org).

Russia executed a large-scale conventional military operation with massive use of firepower at the initial stage of that war, so “counter-terrorism” was a useful political cover-up for brutal use of armed violence against the Chechen civilian population.<sup>25</sup> Organized resistance in Chechnya was effectively suppressed by the end of Putin’s first term in 2004, but that year also saw an unprecedented rise in terrorist attacks across the North Caucasus, including the explosion in Grozny that killed Chechnya’s President Akhmad Kadyrov and the school siege in Beslan, North Ossetia in which some 330 hostages, of which at least 180 were children, lost their lives.<sup>26</sup> A rebel raid on Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, in October 2005 by a troop of 250 rebels went beyond the scope of a terrorist attack and set a high mark for regional insurgency.

Moscow adjusted its counter-terrorist policy, reducing its military component and strengthening two key political pillars. First, it granted full authority to reconstruct war-ravaged Chechnya to Ramzan Kadyrov, who recruited a private army from former rebels and exterminated all opposition to his rule with extreme brutality.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, it made the political elites in the North Caucasus, and particularly in Dagestan, dependent upon generous funding from the federal budget, which thus financed the building of their patronage networks. It took a few years for this policy, amounting to pacification through corruption, to yield results, but Basayev’s death in July 2006 (the FSB claimed credit for the detonation of a truck loaded with explosives) signified the decline of insurgency. The number of attacks gradually decreased, and the toll of casualties in the North Caucasus stabilized at about 700 in 2009-2012, and then went sharply down, so that only 55 people were killed in the first half of 2017.<sup>28</sup>

The top-priority goal in Russian counter-terrorist policy at the start of Putin’s current presidency was to ensure the safety of the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. Despite the two deadly explosions in Volgograd in

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25. For a solid, in-depth analysis of that stage of war, see M. Kramer, “The Perils of Counterinsurgency: Russia’s War in Chechnya”, *International Security*, vol. 29, No. 3, winter 2004/2005, pp. 5-63.

26. On the European Court of Human Rights’ decision to hold Russia responsible for mishandling the crisis and to pay the victims nearly €3 billion in damages, see K. Basayev and A. Osborn, “European Court Rules Russia Fatally Botched Beslan School Siege”, Reuters, 13 April 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com>.

27. For a well-researched political portrait, see A. Malashenko, *Ramzan Kadyrov: rossijskij politik kavkazskoj natsional’nosti* [Ramzan Kadyrov: The Chechen version of Russian authoritarianism], Moskovskij Tsentr Karnegi, 2009, <http://carnegieendowment.org>.

28. The most reliable source of data is the sustained effort by the NGO Kavkazskij Uzel; [www.kavkaz-uzel.eu](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu).

December 2013, that goal was successfully achieved.<sup>29</sup> The statistics on attacks and casualties have continued to improve, and many analysts have started to predict sustainable stability in the North Caucasus.<sup>30</sup> There is, however, one new high-impact factor that works against this normalization: the rise and mutation of ISIS (*Daesh*) in the Iraq/Syria war zone. Russian authorities let hundreds of volunteers from Dagestan and Chechnya join the ranks of ISIS, assuming that this exodus would help further decrease the pool of recruits for domestic insurgency.<sup>31</sup> The number of attacks has indeed remained low in 2016-2017, but they have become better organized.<sup>32</sup> The attack on a National Guard base in Chechnya on 24 March 2017 indicated that a new wave of rebel activity might be gathering force.<sup>33</sup> The units of the National Guard, meanwhile, were mobilized at that time for suppressing the strike of truck drivers in Makhachkala, Dagestan.<sup>34</sup>

Russian authorities are clearly not ready for the possible return of seasoned ISIS fighters, and the liberation of Mosul and Raqqa by the US-led coalition in summer-autumn 2017 might stimulate this homecoming.<sup>35</sup> The ISIS-inspired terrorist attack in Surgut was downplayed as a conventional crime, even after President Macron's expression of condolences.<sup>36</sup> The economic situation in the North Caucasus is deteriorating as subsidies and direct transfers from the federal budget are curtailed, and only Kadyrov can demand more money.<sup>37</sup> Chechnya in particular is turning into an uncontrollable entity as Kadyrov turns his

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29. For a competent assessment of that threat, see B. M. Jenkins, "The Terrorist Threat to the Sochi Olympics", The RAND blog, 31 January 2014, [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org).

30. E. Klimenko and N. J. Melvin, "Decreasing Violence in the North Caucasus: Is an End to the Regional Conflict in Sight?", *SIPRI Commentary*, Stockholm, 15 July 2016, [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org).

31. Chechens gained a reputation as the toughest fighters in ISIS ranks; see J. Yaffa, "Chechnya's ISIS Problem", *The New Yorker*, 12 February 2016, [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com).

32. "Severnyj Kavkaz: na fone rosta nasiliia v Chechne boeviki stali dejstvovat' gorazdo effektivnej" [North Caucasus: as violence increased in Chechnya, fighters have become much more effective], *Kavkazskij Uzel*, 6 April 2017, [www.kavkaz-uzel.eu](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu).

33. Investigation of this attack is presented in E. Milashkina, "'Kitajskij rasstrel' v stanitse Naurskoj" ["Chinese Execution" in Naurskaya village], *Novaia Gazeta*, 27 March 2017, [www.novayagazeta.ru](http://www.novayagazeta.ru).

34. K. Kazenin, "Transportnyj uzel: pochemu protestuiut dagestanskije dal'nobojschiki" [Transport Knot: Why Dagestani Truckers Are on Strike], *RBC*, 5 April 2017, [www.rbc.ru](http://www.rbc.ru).

35. L. Aron, "The Coming of the Russian Jihad", *War on the Rocks*, Part 1, 23 September 2016, <https://warontherocks.com>; Part 2, 19 December 2016, <https://warontherocks.com>.

36. A. Kamakin, "Reznia v Surgute i politkorrektnost': nado li utaivat' pravdu" [Knife Attack in Surgut and Political Correctness: Should the Truth Be Covered?], *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, 21 August 2017, [www.mk.ru](http://www.mk.ru).

37. E. Gavrilov, "Kadyrova vozmutilo predlozhenie Minfina urezat' biudzhet Chechni na 2017 god" [Kadyrov Is Outraged by the Finance Ministry's Plan to Cut Chechnya's Budget in 2017], *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, 1 November 2016, [www.mk.ru](http://www.mk.ru).



battalions into an instrument of regional and even foreign policy.<sup>38</sup> Moscow is unable to buy stability and has diminishing capacity for enforcing it as the Armed Forces are concentrating their efforts on Ukraine and the Western theatre, as well as Syria, and the National Guard is not up to the task.

## Moscow as the focal point of the struggle for regime survival

Two deadly explosions, which destroyed apartment buildings in Moscow in September 1999, propelled the struggle against terrorism to the top of Russia's security agenda—and catapulted Putin to the position of supreme power. Launching a massive military operation against Chechnya, he was never in doubt that the most sensitive and politically crucial focal point of his counter-terrorist strategy was Moscow.<sup>39</sup> In the first half of the 2000s, Moscow was by far the most terror-affected capital in Europe. Putin successfully channelled public anxiety into sustained support for his progressively authoritarian regime.<sup>40</sup> The chain of attacks continued during Dmitri Medvedev's "interregnum" presidency, with the double metro bombing in March 2010, but stopped after the Domodedovo airport bombing in January 2011. The *Global Terrorism Index* ranked Russia among the ten most affected countries in the past decade, but the most recent data, covering the period 2000-2015, puts it in 30<sup>th</sup> place, right after France.<sup>41</sup>

Returning to the Kremlin in 2012, Putin encountered an entirely different and quite unexpected threat on the streets of Moscow: big crowds of social-network-coordinated protesters. The street rallies were remarkably peaceful, but, on the eve of Putin's presidential inauguration on 6 May 2012, violent clashes were deliberately provoked, resulting in hundreds of arrests. The authorities used that provocation as a pretext for adopting and enforcing new legislation against "radical extremism", which

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38. A sharp opinion is expressed in: P. Luzin, "Ramzan Kadyrov: Russia's Top Diplomat", *Intersection*, 11 April 2017, <http://intersectionproject.eu>.

39. A thorough re-examination of that critical moment can be found in: D. Satter, *The Less You Know, The Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin*. New Haven CO: Yale University Press, 2016.

40. For my analysis of this situation, see P. K. Baev, "Instrumentalizing Counterterrorism for Regime Consolidation in Putin's Russia", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 27, No. 4, 2004, pp. 337-352.

41. *Global Terrorism Index 2016*, Institute for Economics & Peace, November 2016, <http://visionofhumanity.org>.

was treated on a par with terrorism.<sup>42</sup> Political attention and material resources were concentrated on deterring this new threat to regime survival, and the newly created National Guard applied its training to forceful crowd control.<sup>43</sup>

In the background of the campaign to excoriate the “fifth column” of liberal opposition, fanned by state propaganda, the “loyalist” kind of political terrorism, which had targeted such key regime critics as Anna Politkovskaya (2006) and Galina Starovoitova (1998), gained new momentum. Boris Nemtsov, a charismatic leader of the opposition, was shot down on 27 February 2015 on a bridge (which has unofficially been named after him) right under the walls of the Kremlin. The involvement of FSB/FSO in this meticulously organized assassination is impossible to prove, but the official investigation has established a disturbing “Chechen connection”. Five petty conspirators were found guilty by the court, but what has come clear in the failure to establish the chain of command is that Kadyrov has built a diversified business-criminal enterprise in Moscow and is able to forcefully protect his interests and subordinates against any hostile actions by the quasi-omnipotent FSB.<sup>44</sup>

Amidst the preparations for deterring street protests and squabbles between special services, the explosion in St Petersburg’s metro on 3 April 2017 came as a shock, which instantly upped concerns about new terrorist attacks to 84%.<sup>45</sup> The fact that Putin was on that day visiting Russia’s second largest city amplified the resonance of the attack and prompted Ksenia Sobchak, an opposition-leaning TV celebrity, to berate him, pointing to his responsibility for diverting the efforts in countering

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42. The federal law “On Countering Extremist Activity” which was approved in 2002 contains an extremely wide definition of extremism, which makes it possible to outlaw and repress any protest action, such as, for instance, the anti-corruption protests in June 2017 ; See “Federal’nyj zakon ‘O protivodejstvii ekstremitskoj deiatel’nosti’” [Federal law “On Countering Extremist Activity”], Sovet Bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federatsii, 25 juillet 2002, [www.scrf.gov.ru](http://www.scrf.gov.ru). On its application, see A. Morozov, “Radikalizatsiia protesta: kak Kreml’ i oppozitsiia vstrechaiut 12 iunia”, [Radicalization of Protest: How the Kremlin and the Opposition Will Face the 12<sup>th</sup> of June], RBK, 9 June 2017, [www.rbc.ru](http://www.rbc.ru).

43. A. Golts, “Gromit’ i ne pushchat” [Suppress and Disallow], *Ezhednevnyj Zhurnal*, 25 April 2016, [www.ej.ru](http://www.ej.ru).

44. S. Sokolov, “Slaboviki: ‘delo Nemtsova’: pravookhranitel’nye organy i spetssluzhby Rossii bessil’ny pered ‘Chechenskimi silovikami’” [Weaklings: in the Nemtsov Case, Law Enforcement and Special Services Are Powerless against the “Chechen siloviki”], *Novaja Gazeta*, 16 April 2017, [www.novayagazeta.ru](http://www.novayagazeta.ru).

45. The Levada Center opinion poll also showed that 45% of respondents put the blame for the attack on Islamic extremism, while 19% saw involvement of foreign special services; see I. Sidorkova, V. Dergachev, “Bolee 80% rossiian zaiavili o boiazni novykh teraktov” [More than 80% of Russians Expressed Fear of New Terrorist Attacks], RBK, 17 April 2017, [www.rbc.ru](http://www.rbc.ru).



terrorism toward suppressing discontent.<sup>46</sup> This deliberate merger of the terrorist threat with the challenge of “non-systemic” opposition causes deepening divisions in society—instead of the unity achieved after the 1999 bombings—about the readiness of the authorities to deal with the real sources and drivers of the new waves of terrorist attacks.<sup>47</sup> The Kremlin is probably correct in the assessment that protest activity constitutes the main threat to regime survival, but its capacity to deter this threat is diminished rather than augmented by mixing up the widening opposition movement with the multiplying terrorist networks.

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46. K. Sobchak, “Pokusit'sia na Piter—eto pokusit'sia na vashe mnogoletnee prezidentstvo” [To Target St. Petersburg Is to Target Your Long Presidency], *Ekho Moskvyy*, 9 April 2017, <http://echo.msk.ru>.

47. A. Pertsev, “Why the Terrorist Attack in St. Petersburg Is Dividing Russian Society”, *Commentary*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 6 April 2017, <http://carnegie.ru>.

# Two Turns in Russia's Struggle with the Spectre of Terror

The shift in threat perception in the Kremlin at the start of this decade from “classical” terrorism originating in the North Caucasus to what is defined as “radical extremism”—but is in fact protest activity primarily among the urban middle classes—resulted in a reorientation of counter-terrorism and military policies. In the course of the Chechen wars, in Putin’s own words, the suspicion that the USA were supporting the rebels gradually increased, but there was not a shadow of doubt in the Russian leadership that the West was behind the 2012 protests in Moscow.<sup>48</sup> This re-evaluation of interference by the USA and Europe augmented Russia’s readiness to break the rules of behaviour on the international arena set by treacherous Western “partners”. The first such break happened with the annexation of Crimea triggered by the stunning victory of *Euro-Maidan* in Kiev, perceived in Moscow as an anti-constitutional coup by extremists sponsored by the EU and USA. The second break was executed with the intervention in Syria aimed at rescuing a “friendly” regime threatened by the rise of extremist forces. In both cases, counter-terrorism was part of the justification for Russia’s actions, and the goal of defeating extremism prevailed over intentions to engage in cooperation with the West.

## Counter-terrorist angles of the Ukraine conflict

The swift military operation securing Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 provoked the protracted violent conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which currently constitutes the gravest challenge to European security. This complex conflict has many unique features and dangerous impacts, but what is relevant here is its particular and often distorted

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48. In a recent interview with Oliver Stone, Putin spelled out the old suspicions about the US manipulation of terrorists to destabilize Russia under the cover of counter-terrorism cooperation; “Putin v interv’iu Stounu zaiavil, chto SShA ispol’zovali chechenskikh terroristov dlia raskachki situatsii v RF” [During an Interview Putin Told Stone that the US Used Chechen Terrorists to Destabilise Russia], NEWSru.com, 13 June 2017, [www.newsru.com](http://www.newsru.com).

counter-terrorism dimension. Indeed, one of the justifications advanced by Moscow for its deployment of special operations forces in Crimea was the allegedly urgent task of preventing terrorist attacks on the Russian population. That claim gained new currency in August 2016, when the FSB announced its success in thwarting sabotage by a Ukrainian terrorist group dispatched to Crimea.<sup>49</sup> Putin immediately declared a breakdown of the Minsk process, but had to back off when the flimsiness of the evidence became obvious.<sup>50</sup> The FSB hasn't tried to replay that failure but keeps insisting that the Ukrainian security service is recruiting the Crimeans for terrorist networks.<sup>51</sup>

The main proposition in Putin's assault on Ukraine was the unacceptability of the "anti-constitutional coup" allegedly executed by extremists supported and directed by the USA and the EU. In this regard, his policy of standing firm against "colour revolutions" converges and blends with his counter-terrorist policy, so that direct use of military force against the neighbouring state, which is historically and culturally close to Russia, becomes entirely justified. The pronounced emphasis on condemning extremism and terrorism in the furious anti-Ukrainian propaganda has reinforced a shift in public opinion, so that, even after three years of conflict, 56% of Russians express a negative attitude toward Ukraine, while in late 2013 as many as 77% confirmed a positive attitude.<sup>52</sup> In a recent murder case, Moscow put the blame for the assassination of Denis Voronkov, former deputy of the State Duma who sought political refuge in Ukraine, on the "murderous regime" in Kiev.<sup>53</sup> The prejudice has grown so deep that, even without any shred of evidence, as many as 9% of

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49. For an elaborate description of that operation, see I. Egorov, "Diversanty prishli po vode: FSB obezvedila v Krymu ukrainskuiu terroristicheskuiu set'" [The Saboteurs Came by the Water: The FSB Neutralized a Ukrainian Terrorist Network in Crimea], *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 10 August 2016, <https://rg.ru>. For a convincing revelation of the fake evidence, see Y. Latynina, "Ukrainskij van der Liubbe" [Ukrainian Van Der Lubbe], *Novaia Gazeta*, 12 August 2016, [www.novayagazeta.ru](http://www.novayagazeta.ru).

50. N. Peterson, "Putin Steps Back from the Brink of War in Ukraine", *Newsweek*, 20 August 2016, [www.newsweek.com](http://www.newsweek.com).

51. "FSB obvinila ukrainskie spetssluzhby v verbovke krymchan na granitse" [FSB Accused the Ukrainian Special Services of Recruiting Crimeans on the Border], Interfax, 25 July 2017, [www.interfax.ru](http://www.interfax.ru).

52. "Rossiia i mir" [Russia and the World], Levada Tsentr, 10 April 2017, [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru). In a different poll, 50% of respondents saw Ukraine as hostile toward Russia, compared with 69% in the case of the USA, and just 8% for France. See "'Druz'ia' i 'vragi' Rossii" [Russia's "Friends" and "Enemies"], Levada Tsentr, 5 June 2017, [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

53. T. Ivzhenko, "Na puti Voronkova k Ponomarevu vstal killer" [Killer Stopped Voronkov on the Way to Ponomarev], *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 24 March 2017, [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

Russians believe that the terrorist attack in the St Petersburg metro was organized by the Ukrainian special services.<sup>54</sup>

On the Ukrainian side, there is also heavy political exploitation of the counter-terrorist discourse in portraying and rationalizing the conflict with Russia, so that the combat deployment of armed forces in the Donbass war zone is defined as an “anti-terrorist operation” (ATO).<sup>55</sup> Such a definition doesn’t fit well with the well-documented political position on Russia’s military intervention into Eastern Ukraine, so a change of the “ATO format” is being discussed in Kiev, which still seeks to avoid taking the logical step of officially describing Russia as an aggressor state, which implies a declaration of war.<sup>56</sup> While the character of trench warfare along the line of the non-existent ceasefire in Donbass is very far from a counter-terrorist operation, the barely controlled violent chaos inside the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics is not that different from the situation in terrorist-controlled enclaves in failed states. Moscow cannot deploy enough military force inside the war zone to control effectively the behaviour of various motley armed groupings that are doing much of the actual fighting, so it has to resort to selective elimination of the most notorious warlords.<sup>57</sup> A potentially serious social problem for Russia is the return of many armed volunteers, traumatized by the senseless, violent hostilities in Eastern Ukraine, to rather unwelcoming communities.

## The fig leaf of counter-terrorism for the Syrian intervention

The military intervention in the Syrian civil war launched by Moscow in late September 2015 had many incentives and drivers, but this multi-causation doesn’t diminish the possibility that Putin’s decision on undertaking such a high-risk enterprise could prove to be a serious political blunder.<sup>58</sup> Counter-terrorism has been a key part of the official justification for this projection of power to a theatre where Russia has many traditional connections but few material interests. For that matter, the intention to

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54. “Terakt v Sankt-Peterburge i strakh teraktov v Rossii” [The Terrorist Attack in St. Petersburg and the Fear of Terrorist Attacks in Russia], Levada Tsent, 17 April 2017, [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

55. For updates on this operation, see the website of the Information Analysis Center, <http://mediarnbo.org>.

56. On a possible change of definitions, see T. Ivzhenko, “Kiev gotovit novyj zakon o reintegratsii Donbassa” [Kiev Is Preparing a New Law on the Reintegration of Donbass], *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 19 July 2017, [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

57. J. Losh, “Is Russia Killing Off Eastern Ukraine’s Warlords?”, *Foreign Policy*, 25 October 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com>.

58. My assessment of this risk: P. K. Baev, “What Drives Moscow’s Military Adventurism?”, *Current History*, vol. 115, No. 783, September 2016, pp. 251-260.

deploy military force to Syria was announced in Putin's high-profile speech at the UN General Assembly, in which the main emphasis was set on building a broad international coalition to defeat terrorism. The problem with that proposition was the transparent desire to rescue and strengthen the al-Assad regime, which for most stake-holders in the outcome of the Syrian war was—and still remains—unacceptable.

In much the same way as the aggression in Ukraine, the counter-terrorist policy in Syria converges with and in fact becomes subordinate to Russia's ideological stance against the “evil” of revolutions allegedly promoted by the hostile West. Putin furiously condemns the chaos of the “Arab Spring”, and perceives the victory of the al-Assad regime, despite him having little personal sympathy with the dictator, as the decisive point where the tide of revolutions has to be turned back.<sup>59</sup> In the chaotic situation of the Syrian civil war, it was entirely possible for Moscow to define the anti-regime opposition of all persuasions as “terrorists”, so that its indiscriminate air strikes invariably found targets, even if the majority of the casualties were civilian.<sup>60</sup> The Russian argument that ISIS (*Daesh*) is not the only terrorist organization in Syria is correct, but when Lavrov turns this argument into an accusation that the USA has always “spared” the *Jabhat An-Nusra* (affiliated with *Al Qaeda*) in order to use it for overthrowing the al-Assad regime, reasonable assessment becomes an exercise in propaganda.<sup>61</sup>

The scale of Russian military deployment was in fact quite limited. It reached a maximum of 70 aircraft and helicopters in early 2016, and currently the grouping is about half of that strength. The Russian high command reported 23,000 sorties up to April 2017 and 2,000 sorties in June-July 2017, but the ability of the Syrian government forces to conduct offensive operations has remained poor despite the best efforts of Russian

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59. A typical Russian conceptualization of this stance can be found in: A. Bartosh, “Tsvetnye revoliutsii i gibridnye vojny sovremennosti” [Colour Revolutions and Hybrid Wars of Our Time], *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 22 January 2016, <http://nvo.ng.ru>. One useful analysis can be found in: J. Miller, “What Vladimir Putin Learned from the Arab Spring”, *The Interpreter*, 14 March 2016, [www.interpretermag.com](http://www.interpretermag.com).

60. One early evaluation can be found in: “More than 90% of Russian Airstrikes in Syria Have Not Targeted ISIS, US Says”, *The Guardian*, 7 October 2015, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com); a follow-up is: E. Graham-Harrison, “Russian Airstrikes in Syria Killed 2,000 Civilians in Six Months”, *The Guardian*, 15 March 2016, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

61. Lavrov made this accusation after meeting with US State Secretary Rex Tillerson in Moscow; see “Lavrov: RF podozrevaet, chto SShA beregut ‘an-Nusru’, chtoby svergnut’ Asada” [Lavrov: Russia Suspects the US of Protecting “al-Nusra” in Order to Overthrow Assad], *RIA-Novosti*, 12 April 2017, <https://ria.ru>.

military advisers.<sup>62</sup> While Moscow has been eager to demonstrate its long-range strike capabilities, it has remained reluctant to proceed from air strikes to “boots on the ground” (private contractors make little difference in this regard), so the Syrian army has achieved some success in offensives against the beleaguered ISIS, but dares not attack Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies in their strongholds in Idlib province.<sup>63</sup>

Russian special forces (often camouflaged as military police), private security contractors (primarily the Vagner group) and a battalion of Chechen paramilitaries have been performing some combat-support functions, including monitoring of ceasefires, and taking more casualties than Moscow is prepared to admit.<sup>64</sup> The brunt of fighting on the ground is carried out by Hezbollah and other Iran-sponsored Shia militias, who guarantee the security of Russian bases and convoys—which reveals the hypocrisy of Moscow’s “principled” stance against international terrorism.<sup>65</sup>

One important proposition in Moscow’s justification of its Syrian intervention has been the strategic advantage of destroying terrorist organizations in their main area of origin, instead of trying to prevent a spillover into the Russian Federation and engage in yet another fight on home territory. This reasoning helped to swing public opinion in favour of the dubious enterprise, so that, in November 2015, 55% of respondents were in favour of the airstrikes, and only 27% against.<sup>66</sup> The bomb explosion on board the Metrojet Flight 9268 on 31 October 2015, causing 224 fatalities, indicated that Russia had become exposed to new kinds of terrorist threats, but there was no escalation of attacks, so that tragedy remained an isolated event. The sustained decline of violence in the North Caucasus in 2014-2016 seemed to add credibility to the unreliable official

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62. The latest briefing of Lieutenant General Sergey Rudskoi, Chief of the Main Operational Department of the General Staff, is available on the MoD website: see “Nachal’nik Glavnogo operativnogo upravleniia Genshtaba VS RF general-polkovnik Sergej Rudskoj proviol brifing dlia predstavitelej SMI” [Colonel-General Sergey Rudskoy, Chief of the Main Operational Department of the General Staff, briefed media representatives], Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 24 July 2017, <http://syria.mil.ru>.

63. On the effectiveness of the new weapon systems, see N. Sokov, “Russia’s New Conventional Capability: Implications for Eurasia and Beyond”, *PONARS Eurasia Memo* 472, May 2017, [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org).

64. M. Tsetkova, “Russian Losses in Syria Jump in 2017, Reuters Estimate Shows”, Reuters, 2 August 2017, [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com). An informative journalistic investigation of the Vagner organization can be found in: D. Korotkov, “Spisok Vagnera” [The Vagner List], Fontanka, 21 August 2017, [www.fontanka.ru](http://www.fontanka.ru).

65. A. Corbeil, “Russia Is Learning about Hezbollah”, Sada, Carnegie Endowment, 11 January 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org>.

66. These figures remained on the same level in October 2016; see “Sirijskij konflikt” [The Syrian Conflict], Levada Tsentr, 31 October 2016, [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

estimates of large-scale migration of potential terrorists (estimated at 4,000-5,000, with the top figure of 10,000 for Russia and Central Asia) from the region to the Iraq/Syria war zone, which could even have been encouraged by the FSB.<sup>67</sup> The threat related to the return of seasoned fighters was predictable; however, it was not until spring 2017 that it started to materialize, and Putin felt obliged to refer to it in an interview.<sup>68</sup> The attack on the National Guard patrols in Astrakhan was overshadowed by the explosion in the St Petersburg metro, but it could be significant that ISIS took responsibility for the former.<sup>69</sup>

There are deep economic and social causes that feed the instability in the North Caucasus; there are also bitter grievances among severely exploited migrant workers that turn Moscow into a major recruitment centre for various terrorist networks, including the ISIS. Russia's intervention in Syria, which has led to a strongly negative reaction in the Sunni part of the Islamic world, could become a major catalyst of mutation of various sources of discontent into terrorist activities.

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67. "The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?", Report No. 238, International Crisis Group, 16 March 2016, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Evidence is gathered in the constantly updated website "Vykhodtsy s Kavkaza v riadakh IG (IGIL)" [Individuals from the Caucasus in the Ranks of IS (ISIS)], Kavkazskij Uzel, 21 April 2017, [www.kavkaz-uzel.eu](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu).

68. An early evaluation of this threat is: M. Kramer, "The Return of Islamic State Fighters: Impact on the Caucasus and Central Asia", *PONARS Eurasia Memo* 381, August 2015, [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org). For Putin's remarks, see "Putin: dejstviia VC RF v Sirii dolzhny prepiatstvovat' vozvrashcheniiu terroristov v Rossiiu" [Putin: Russian Military Operation in Syria Should Prevent the Return of Terrorists to Russia], TASS, 12 April 2017, <http://tass.ru>.

69. P. Kazarnovski, "IGIL vziala na sebja otvetstvennost' za napadenie na Rosgvardiiu v Astrakhani" [ISIS Claimed Responsibility for the Attack on the National Guard in Astrakhan], RBK, 6 April 2017, [www.rbc.ru](http://www.rbc.ru).

# From Missed Opportunities to False Prospects for International Cooperation

From the start of Putin's "era", Moscow has sought to convert its strong priority of combatting domestic terrorism into opportunities for developing international cooperation in counter-terrorism. Meeting with US President George W. Bush in June 2001, Putin initiated a conversation on the threat of Al Qaeda brewing in Afghanistan and earned trust from his counterpart, even if his warning wasn't taken seriously.<sup>70</sup> As the Ukraine crisis led Russia into a new confrontation with the West, counter-terrorism was left as the only avenue in which meaningful cooperation appeared possible and indeed essential for moderating the tensions that threaten to reach a dangerous new high with the enforcement of new sanctions initiated by the US Congress.

## Failure to connect with the US agenda

The cooperative connection with the reformatted US counter-terrorism policy lasted for only about two years after the September 11, 2001 calamity, as Moscow proceeded from indirect support for the coalition operation in Afghanistan to strong opposition to the Second Gulf War. The attempts to add an avenue of practical cooperation in the struggle against terrorism to the "reset" agenda initiated by President Barack Obama in 2009 were far from determined on both sides, and the US investigation of the Boston marathon bombing on 15 April 2013 added to mutual frustration rather than prompting the FSB and the FBI to increase these efforts.<sup>71</sup> By then, Putin had already concluded that US special services were behind the eruption of street protests in Moscow, so nothing useful could possibly be achieved by exploring opportunities for joint action against the diminished terrorist threat and the much-increased threat of

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70. Condoleezza Rice admitted that she "was taken aback by Putin's alarm and vehemence" concerning al Qaeda; see her memoir *No Higher Honour: A Memoir of My Years in Washington*. NY: Crown, 2011, p. 30.

71. An argument for more joint effort is: M. Rojansky "Fixing Russia Cooperation after Boston", *The National Interest*, 2 May 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org>.



“extremism”. The launch of the Russian intervention in Syria marked a new low in cooperation, as the US-backed Free Syrian Army was badly hit by Russian airstrikes.<sup>72</sup>

The proposition to establish practical cooperation in the broadly defined area of counter-terrorism gained new relevance with the election of Donald Trump as US president in November 2016, which was celebrated in Moscow with great joy.<sup>73</sup> Russian domestic affairs were designated as off-limits in any possible joint operations, and it was Syria that should have been the main focus for these, while Afghanistan was seen as a potentially useful secondary focus. This political draft for overcoming the deadlock of alienation, which had become “unreasonably” rigid by the end of Obama’s presidential term, implied that new cooperation in counter-terrorism would become primarily a military matter in managing the war and not a task for various special services.

In order to clear the ground for a new start, the Russian top brass decided to end the battle for Aleppo, which had generated too much negative publicity, and the devastated city was indeed captured in the last two weeks of 2016.<sup>74</sup> Moscow proceeded by setting a new negotiation format involving Turkey and Iran, seeking to establish a peace-enforcement framework that would include the al-Assad regime, two regional stakeholders and Kurdish forces (YPG), but exclude the USA and the EU.<sup>75</sup> In parallel, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov had two meetings with US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Joseph Dunford, attempting to progress from tactical interactions on the ground to more coordinated or even joint operations.<sup>76</sup> Some progress was indeed achieved as Russian and US forces jointly secured the contested town of Manbij

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72. M. Alami, “Can FSA Get Back on its Feet After Russian Intervention?”, *Al-Monitor*, 31 December 2015, [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com). One significant episode of cooperation was the FBI involvement in proving it was a bomb explosion that brought down the Metrojet Flight 9268, which made it impossible for Russia to accept the Egyptian denials of a terrorist plot; see A. Knight, “Egypt: Why Putin Needs the FBI”, *New York Review of Books*, 9 November 2015, [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).

73. One sober reflection on that enthusiasm is: F. Lukyanov, “Konets ne nachavshegosia romana” [The End of the Affair that never Started], *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 11 April 2017, <https://rg.ru>. On the prospect for cooperation in counterterrorism, see E. Stepanova, “How and Why the United States and Russia Can Cooperate on Terrorism”, *PONARS Eurasia Memo* 450, November 2016, [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org).

74. S. Rainsford, “Aleppo Syria: Russia Hails ‘Victory over Terrorism’”, *BBC News*, 16 December 2016, [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).

75. H. Meyer, “Russia Seeks Syria Peace with Iran, Turkey as US Sidelined”, *Bloomberg*, 22 January 2017, [www.bloomberg.com](http://www.bloomberg.com).

76. R. Sisk, “Dunford Meets with Russian, Turkish Generals on Syria”, *Military.com*, 7 March 2017, [www.military.com](http://www.military.com).

about 100km north-east of Aleppo, but that small success unraveled with remarkable speed.<sup>77</sup>

The US missile strike on the Syrian air base Shayrat in the early morning of 7 April 2017 came as a big shock to Moscow, and had a greater impact on the Russian intervention than on the capabilities of the Syrian air force.<sup>78</sup> It wasn't only the fact that the air/missile defence system that was supposed to form a "bubble" covering Latakia and Tartus was unable to intercept the low-flying Tomahawks; it was also the suddenly exposed flaws in the Russian strategy of winning the Syrian war that aggrieved the Kremlin bitterly. This strategy was centred on defeating Jabhat An-Nusra in Idlib province by combining air strikes with ground offensives by Shia militias, while exploiting the YPG offensive on Raqqa to expand control of Damascus.<sup>79</sup> Moscow was aware that Turkey remained firmly opposed to YPG and that the USA was unhappy with Iranian control over the Hezbollah and other Shia militias, but assumed that it could navigate these disagreements by emphasizing the common cause of exterminating terrorists of all persuasions.<sup>80</sup>

The chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun (Idlib province) on 4 April 2017 didn't deviate much from that Russian strategy—and damaged it severely. Moscow had good reasons to assume that the Trump administration would ignore that episode, which had nothing to do with the heavily prioritized fight with ISIS, but miscalculated badly. Its attempts to argue about the lack of hard evidence of Syrian capabilities to deliver chemical weapons were dismissed as a cover-up, and invited accusations that it had a direct role in that airstrike.<sup>81</sup> Turkey expressed full support for the punitive US missile strike and argued for more, while Israel delivered a strike of its own, so that Russia was left in complete isolation.<sup>82</sup> Tillerson

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77. A. deGrandpre, "US and Russian Troops Are Now in the Same Syrian City", *Military Times*, 13 March 2017, [www.militarytimes.com](http://www.militarytimes.com).

78. My assessment of that impact can be found in: P. K. Baev, "Kremlin Reels from US Missile Strike on Syria", Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 14, No. 49, 10 April 2017, <https://jamestown.org>.

79. A. Sharkovski, "Chto delaiut russkie voennye v Afrine i Manbidzhe" [What Russian Soldiers are doing in Afrin and Manbij], *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 23 March 2017, [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

80. On cultivating ties with Turkey, see K. Semenov, "Moskva-Ankara-Damask: vsaimodejstvie i perspektivy sotrudnichestva" [Moscow-Ankara-Damascus: Interaction and Prospects for Cooperation], *Rossijskij Sovet po Mezhdunarodnym Delam (RSMD)*, 27 March 2017, <http://russiancouncil.ru>.

81. A. Yuhas, N. Khomami, and J. Grierson, "US Says Russia Bears Responsibility for Assad's Gas Attack", *The Guardian*, 9 April 2017, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

82. A. Zatari, "Ocherednoj udar nozhom v spinu: Erdogan odobril raketnyj udar SShA po Sirii" [Another Stab in the back: Erdogan Approved the US Missile Strike in Syria], *Gazeta.ru*, 7 April 2017, [www.gazeta.ru](http://www.gazeta.ru); J. Khoury, "Three Reportedly Killed in Israel Strike on Pro-Assad Militia in Syria", *Haaretz*, 23 April 2017, [www.haaretz.com](http://www.haaretz.com).

suggested in no uncertain terms that Russia should rethink its support for the al-Assad regime, but Moscow instead suspended the agreement on “de-conflicting” in the Syrian airspace, and prospects for military-to-military cooperation were pushed into limbo.<sup>83</sup> The agreement was reaffirmed in early May, only to be suspended again in June, after the US Navy F/A-18E Super Hornet destroyed a Syrian Su-22 bomber near Raqqa.<sup>84</sup> The introduction of a new package of US sanctions has drastically reduced the scope for possible joint efforts, even if the US military command prefers to keep open some channels of communication on Syria. For Moscow, that is currently the only hope for keeping a modicum of cooperation going.<sup>85</sup>

The breakdown of efforts to establish cooperation has made the US administration suspicious about the aims of Russian engagement in the crisis management in Afghanistan.<sup>86</sup> Moscow’s attempts to stage talks on countering the threat of terrorism originating in this country have been aimed primarily at creating an opportunity for China to address its regional security concerns and at granting Iran a role in the stabilization of this seat of conflict, but there has never been an agenda of undermining the US and NATO operations.<sup>87</sup> Explaining the newly modified US strategy for Afghanistan, State Secretary Tillerson accused Russia of supplying arms to the Taliban, but evidence of such links is scarce and the rationale for befriending an old enemy is dubious.<sup>88</sup> What has rendered these Russian manoeuvres rather irrelevant is the mutation of the terrorist threat in the vast region of Central Asia, which is both connected with and separated from Afghanistan. Deep social antagonisms inside the autocratic states of the region (in particular, in the Fergana valley) have been exported outside its borders through massive migration of labour, and aggravated by the mistreatment of migrants by Russia, which has received millions.<sup>89</sup> Russia

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83. T. Frear, “Regional Imperative: Why We Need the Syria Deconfliction Agreement”, European Leadership Network, 12 April 2017, [www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org](http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org).

84. T. Demerly, “U.S. Navy F/A-18E Super Hornet Downs Syrian Su-22 near Raqqa, Syria. And Here is Everything We Know.”, *The Aviationist*, 19 June 2017, <https://theaviationist.com>.

85. I. Subbotin, “Pentagon mozhnet spasti otnosheniia Rossii i SShA” [The Pentagon Can Save Russia-US Relations], *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 28 July 2017, [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

86. M. Gidda, “After Syria, US and Russia Are Now Clashing over Afghanistan”, *Newsweek*, 11 April 2017, [www.newsweek.com](http://www.newsweek.com).

87. V. Skosyrev, “Rossiia pytaetsia sygrat’ rol’ posrednika v Afganistane” [Russia Is Trying to Play A Mediator Role in Afghanistan], *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 16 February 2017, [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

88. K. Calamur, “Is Russia Really Arming the Taliban?”, *The Atlantic*, 25 August 2017, [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com). A sound Russian analysis is: A. Dubnov, “Bezvykhodnaia strategiiia. Pochemu SShA ne ujdut iz Afganistana” [Desperate Strategy: Why the US Will not Leave Afghanistan], Republic.ru, 24 August 2017, <https://republic.ru>.

89. On the scope of this problem, see V. Frolov, “Pasporta i granitsy. Voprosy k rossijskoj politike v Srednej Azii” [Passports and Borders: Questioning Russia’s Policy in Central Asia], Republic.ru, 24 April 2017, <https://republic.ru>.

has routinely conducted anti-terrorist exercises with its Central Asian allies, but has been caught unprepared by the spread of ISIS influence through the migrant networks, and is slow in addressing this threat because the FSB is poorly prepared to work with vast networks of semi-legal labour migration.<sup>90</sup>

From the US perspective, Russia has turned into a significant part of the problem of the growth of Islamic terrorism through an interplay between the Syria/Iraq and Afghanistan war zones, so that cooperation with Moscow in counter-terrorism could merely resolve some tactical issues, but can neither contribute significantly to the goal of defeating ISIS nor address the problems brewing inside Russia, as well as in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

## False starts in building bridges with the EU

The start of Russian intervention in Syria coincided with a sharp escalation of deadly terrorist attacks in Europe, including the well-coordinated sequence of mass shootings and suicide bombings in Paris on 13 November 2015. Moscow immediately sought to engage the French leadership in a political dialogue on defeating ISIS and establishing coordination of air strikes on terrorist bases in Syria.<sup>91</sup> Reservations in Europe regarding the real aims of the Russian air campaign were at that time downplayed, particularly in the context of the deadly explosion on *Metrojet* Flight 9268 on 31 October 2015, but a convergence of views on the terrorist threat proved to be short-lived.

It was the missile hit by a Turkish F-16 fighter on a Russian Su-24M bomber on 24 November 2015 that marked the first turn in derailing the prospect of cooperation in counter-terrorism. Moscow clearly over-reacted, with sanctions and threats against Turkey and personal insults aimed at President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as well as the deployment of “anti-access/area denial” (A2/AD) capabilities at the Hmeimim airbase.<sup>92</sup> Ankara was compelled to request support from NATO, which was limited

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90. “Udar otkuda ne zhdali: Gotova li Rossiia protivostoiat’ terrorizmu novogo tipa” [A Strike from an Unexpected Place: Is Russia Ready to Face Terrorism of a New Kind?], *Gazeta.Ru*, 21 April 2017, [www.gazeta.ru](http://www.gazeta.ru).

91. On the expectations for closer cooperation, see: D. Evstafiev and A. Berseneva, “Otvetnyj ogon’ po Rakke” [The Return Fire on Raqqa], *Gazeta.Ru*, 18 November 2015, [www.gazeta.ru](http://www.gazeta.ru).

92. A justification of that Russian emotional response to the “stab in the back” can be found in: V. Lepehin, “Udastsia li Turtsii vtianut’ NATO v vojnu protiv Rossii” [Will Turkey Manage to Drag NATO into a War against Russia?], *RIA-Novosti*, 30 November 2015, <https://ria.ru>.

but unequivocal, and which effectively undercut Western consideration of joint military actions against the common enemy.<sup>93</sup> Turkey and Russia started to rebuild their ambiguous partnership in August 2016, but by then it was too late to return to the drafts of possible cooperation because the Russian intervention was recognized in Europe as a driver of the humanitarian disaster. France was among the states that demanded that Russia be held responsible for the tragedy of Aleppo, albeit without much success.<sup>94</sup> As the “martyred city” (in the words of French President Francois Hollande) was captured by al-Assad forces, Russia set a new negotiation framework with Turkey and Iran—and saw no point in including the EU.<sup>95</sup>

One issue that complicated the development of a coherent counter-terrorism policy in the EU at that time was the interplay between the terrorist networks and the migration crisis. Russia could have turned this into an opportunity for cooperation; for instance, by sharing with the concerned Europeans the data on the outflow of potential ISIS recruits from the North Caucasus into the Iraq/Syria war zone; instead, Moscow tried to use this issue as a pressure point. The National Security Strategy, approved by Putin on 31 December 2015, asserts that “the increase of migration flows from Africa and the Middle East to Europe showed the failure of the regional security system in the Euro-Atlantic region, constructed around NATO and the European Union” (Article 16).<sup>96</sup> The accusation of “weaponizing” the migration was perhaps overdone, but Moscow’s attempts to manipulate the traffic of migrants, including on the borders with Finland and Norway, alarmed the European authorities.<sup>97</sup>

By the end of 2016, the intensity of the migration crisis in the EU had decreased, but a new interplay between migration and terrorism has manifested itself since the start of 2017. In several terrorist attacks, from the Istanbul nightclub to the Stockholm shopping street, the perpetrators

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93. N. MacFarquhar and S. Erlanger, “NATO-Russia Tensions Rise after Turkey Downs Jet”, *The New York Times*, 24 November 2015, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

94. C. Barbieri and G. Gotev, “Germany, France Harden Tone on Russia over Aleppo Bombings”, Euractiv, 10 October 2016, [www.euractiv.com](http://www.euractiv.com).

95. On the launch of the Astana process, see: N. Bonsey, “What’s at Stake in the Syrian Peace Talks in Astana?”, International Crisis Group, 24 January 2017, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org).

96. There is no official English translation; the Russian text is available on the Security Council website, see: “Strategiia natsional’noj bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii” [National security Strategy of the Russian Federation], 31 December 2015, [www.scrf.gov.ru](http://www.scrf.gov.ru).

97. The term was coined by US General Philip M. Breedlove, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR); see “Migrant Crisis: Russia and Syria ‘Weaponising’ Migration”, BBC News, 2 March 2016, [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com). On the migration crisis in Northern Europe, see R. Standish, “For Finland and Norway, the Refugee Crisis Heats up Along the Russian Arctic”, *Foreign Policy*, 26 January 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com>.

turned out to be migrants from Central Asia, and Moscow is the main hub for this traffic. The FSB has awakened to this problem, and a small ISIS cell in the Moscow region was exterminated in August, but the spread of these cross-border networks is potentially vast.<sup>98</sup> Even after the St Petersburg metro bombing, the Russian authorities have shown no inclination to engage in discussion with the EU on this matter, which is rooted in the extreme exploitation of migrant labour from Central Asia in Moscow and other Russian cities.

European states have invested great efforts in untangling the networks connecting domestic radicalization with the Middle East, and the Russian media are commenting on the problem of the return of seasoned fighters to the UK, Belgium, and France—but remain silent on the same problem for Russia.<sup>99</sup> There are good reasons to expect a sharp increase in this remigration after the defeats of ISIS in Mosul and Raqqa, but the Russian authorities are (according to what transpires from open sources) uncooperative in sharing the data on Russian fighters in Syria and Iraq.<sup>100</sup> One of the main elements in the all-European efforts to suppress such networks is the interdiction of money flows, but Moscow is firmly set against this, assuming that it adds to the investigations of the Russian export of corruption.<sup>101</sup>

One particular aspect of the counter-terrorism policy, in which cooperation between Russia and the EU could have made sense, is the suppression of ISIS propaganda and recruitment. Russian efforts in this regard are sometimes rather awkward, as for instance in the legal requirement to add the words “organization banned in the Russian Federation” every time that ISIS is mentioned in the print media or on TV/radio.<sup>102</sup> In other instances, these efforts are demonstrably heavy-handed, as in the sentencing to three years in prison of Mahmut Velitov, imam of the Moscow mosque, for mentioning in a Friday prayer the name

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98. S. Mashkin and N. Sergeev, “Shkola smertnikov ustroila laboratoriiu” [The Suicide School Had Set Up a Lab], *Kommersant*, 15 August 2017, [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).

99. See, for instance, “Vo Frantsii vernulis’ bolee 270 boevikov IG” [More than 270 Fighters from IS-Returned to France], TASS, 6 August 2017, <http://tass.ru>.

100. “Nashi’ dzhikhadisty v Sirii: do unichtozheniia eshchio daleko” [“Our” Jihadists in Syria: Elimination Is Still Far Away], *EurAsia Daily*, 25 February 2017, <https://eadaily.com>.

101. On the investigations in Germany of Russian money-laundering, see V. H. Munziger, “Die Russische Geldwaschmaschine” [The Russian Money-Laundering Machine], *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 March 2017, [www.sueddeutsche.de](http://www.sueddeutsche.de).

102. One of the few Russian media that refused to follow this pattern is Meduza, which is based in Latvia. See “‘Meduza’ bol’she ne pishet pro IG ‘terroristicheskaiia organizatsiia, zapreshchena v Rossii’. Kak tak?” [“Meduza” Is No Longer Writing “Terrorist Organization Banned in Russia” about IS. How Come?], Meduza, 1 September 2016, <https://meduza.io>.



of a rebel killed in Dagestan.<sup>103</sup> The main problem, however, is that attempts to establish control over the Internet in Russia, incoherent and ineffectual as they are, are aimed primarily not at countering ISIS propaganda or curtailing communications in terrorist networks, but at reducing undesirable civil society activities by compromising social networks, including, for instance, banning the LinkedIn professional service.<sup>104</sup> In real terms, much less attention is focused on the prevention of recruitment into terrorist networks than on banning the proselytizing work of, for instance, the Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>105</sup> This deliberate mix-up of combatting terrorism and suppression of opposition in the new virtual security domain, not to mention the cyber-attacks on various Western political institutions, renders cooperation in cyber-counter-terrorism quite impossible.

Characteristic in this regard is the insistent suggestion by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, that the “artificial obstacles” in Russia-EU relations be put aside—(starting with sanctions) and that efforts be concentrated on the real agenda of counter-terrorism.<sup>106</sup> The actual situation in bilateral relations is exactly the opposite: Sanctions are a manifestation of real and deep disagreements between the EU and Russia on the norms and values underpinning the European security system, and the prospects for cooperation in counter-terrorism are slim and artificially enhanced. Inviting Putin to Versailles, President Macron sought to explore opportunities for such cooperation; what that discussion made clear, however, is that any use of chemical weapons constitutes a “red line”, which cannot be crossed without punishment.<sup>107</sup> Macron didn't go as far as UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon, who held Russia responsible for the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun on 4 April 2017, but it was clear that he was not accepting Russian denials.<sup>108</sup>

For the European states, there is no way around the moral dilemma that engaging in cooperation with Russia in Syria amounts to agreeing with

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103. On Velitov's case, see M. Muradov, “Propoved' privela v tiur'mu” [A Sermon Has Led to Prison], *Kommersant*, 29 April 2017, <http://kommersant.ru>.

104. C. Kang and K. Benner, “Russia Requires Apple and Google to Remove LinkedIn from Local App Stores”, *The New York Times*, 6 January 2017, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

105. A. Brown, “Why Putin's Prosecution of Jehovah's Witnesses Should Worry Us”, *The Guardian*, 25 April 2017, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

106. “Lavrov Notes Anti-Russian Sanctions Brought up During Talks with Mogherini”, TASS, 24 April 2017, <http://tass.com>.

107. A. Rubin and A. Bredeen, “Emmanuel Macron Challenges Putin on Syria and Gay Rights”, *The New York Times*, 29 May 2017, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

108. “Russia to Blame for Syrian Deaths – Sir Michael Fallon”, BBC News, 9 April 2017, <http://www.bbc.com>.

the aims and conduct of its military intervention, even if the Trump administration has few scruples of this kind.



# Conclusion

Counter-terrorism has been a major element of Russian security policy since the start of Putin's "era", and it has evolved a great deal between the start of the Second Chechen War and the present-day deadlock in the Syrian war. Much experience has been accumulated by Putin's *siloviki* in uncovering and exterminating terrorist networks, and Russia gained an international reputation for its relentless and mostly successful struggle against terrorism. Yet, at present, the threat of terrorist attacks has risen again in Russia, while the efforts to turn counter-terrorism into an avenue for cooperation with the USA and EU have yielded little success.

Three main reasons account for the deterioration of domestic security in the realm of countering the threat of terror. First, Kadyrov's despotic regime in Chechnya, which was bolstered by Moscow as a means of suppressing insurrection in the North Caucasus, has turned into a major source of instability. There are new attacks targeting this regime (which has contributed a battalion of troops to the Syrian intervention), but, more importantly, Kadyrov increasingly relies on methods of terror to protect his corrupt interests in Moscow, across Russia, and even in Europe. The murder of Boris Nemtsov is a clear manifestation of this trend.

Secondly, the FSB and other law-enforcement structures failed to notice the growth of the terrorist threat driven by the problems related to the massive labour migration into Russia from Central Asia. Public anxiety about this inflow has dissipated on the background of the Ukraine crisis, so there is no pressure to introduce mechanisms for regulating migration from Russia's key partners in the Eurasian Economic Union. The extreme exploitation of this "cheap labour" generates an accumulation of grievances, which creates fertile ground for ISIS recruitment. The St Petersburg metro bombing revealed the scope of this threat.

Thirdly, the preoccupation with the threat of "colour revolutions" compels the Kremlin to treat the challenge of street protests the same way as the threat of radicalized extremism and terrorism. More attention and resources are channelled into strengthening the capabilities to suppress brewing discontent than to prevent the return of seasoned fighters from Syria. The series of attacks on the National Guard units showed that the emphasis in their training on crowd control is misplaced.

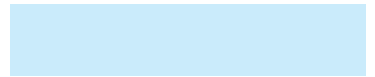
Moscow's effort to convince its key Western counterparts that joint efforts to deter the common threat of terrorism are more important than "artificial" disagreements over the war in Ukraine have duly failed. Great expectations were centred on establishing practical cooperation with the new Trump administration in military operations against ISIS, but the high-level dialogue has been derailed by Russia's interference in the US elections. The prospect of joint operations in Syria has been damaged by the US missile strike, and in Afghanistan Russia is seen in Washington as deliberately unhelpful. The pattern of US-Russia relations is set to remain rigidly confrontational, and counter-terrorism generates tensions that fit this pattern.

The Russian leadership keeps trying to convince the EU and the key European states to engage in cooperation in counter-terrorism, and Putin invariably stresses this point, expressing condolences after such attacks such as in Manchester or Barcelona. It is, however, difficult to find value-added in such cooperation, critically important as the problem is. European leaders cannot bracket out the plain fact that Russia is continuing its aggression against Ukraine and has created an enclave of lawlessness in the parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that are controlled by warlords. Terrorism is a natural product of this "hybrid" war, and Russia's denial of responsibility aggravates this problem. The prime aim of Russian intervention in Syria is to support the al-Assad regime, which constitutes another direct clash with European policies, which aim to combine the fight with ISIS with relief for the humanitarian disaster. In the untangling of terrorist networks, in the investigation of illegal financial flows, and in the combatting of extremist propaganda, Russia is at best non-cooperative, and often more a part of the problem than it could possibly be a part of the solution.

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