



Russia and International Cooperation on Counter-Terrorism

From the Chechen Wars to the Syria Campaign

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Sammanfattning

Sedan terroristattacker mot USA den 11 september 2001 har det internationella samarbetet kring kontraterrorism legat högt upp på dagordningen, särskilt inom FN. Baserat på sina egna erfarenheter av terrorbekämpning såväl hemmavid, i Tjetjenien och Nordkaukasien, liksom i Syrien, använder Ryssland i allt högre grad kontraterrorism som ett medel att öka sitt internationella inflytande. Rapporten illustrerar hur rysk diplomati arbetar nära med brottsbekämpande myndigheter i arbetet mot terrorism. Detta samarbete stärker greppet som Rysslands auktoritära ledning har över den ryska inrikespolitiska utvecklingen i allmänhet och förstärker de ryska åtgärderna i kampen mot terrorism i syfte att öka Rysslands internationella inflytande.

Nyckelord: Ryssland, terrorism, kontraterrorism, Nordkaukasien, Tjetjenien, Dagestan, Ingusjien, Kabardino-Balkarien, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, FN, mänskliga rättigheter, Syrien, Kina, förebyggande av terrorism, PVE, internet-suveränitet.

Summary

Since the terror attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, international cooperation on counter-terrorism has been high up on the agenda, particularly in the United Nations. Based on its experience in counter-terrorism at home, in Chechnya and the North Caucasus, as well as in Syria, Russia is increasingly using counter-terrorism as a pretext to increase its international influence. The report illustrates how Russian diplomacy works closely with law enforcement work on counter-terrorism. This cooperation strengthens the grip that Russia's authoritarian regime has on domestic developments in general and enhances Russian measures in the fight against terrorism with the purpose to bolster Russia's international influence.

Keywords: Russia, terrorism, counter-terrorism, the North Caucasus, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, United Nations, human rights, Syria, China, prevention of terrorism, PVE, internet sovereignty.

Acronyms and abbreviations

ATC	Anti-Terrorism Center
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CE	Caucasus Emirate
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
CTC	Counter-Terrorism Committee
CTED	Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate
CTITF	Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force
DNS	domain name system
DPI	deep package inspection
FSB	Federalnaia sluzhba besopasnosti (Federal Security Service)
GCTF	Global Counterterrorism Forum
GCTS	Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IDP	internally displaced person
IS	Islamic State
JIT	Joint Investigation Team
KGB	Komitet gosudarsvennoi bezopasnosti (Committee for State Security)
MO	Ministerstvo oborony (Ministry of Defence)
MVD	Ministerstvo vnutrennykh del (Ministry of Internal Affairs)
NAK	Natsionalnyi antiterroristicheskii komitet (National Antiterrorism Committee)
NCFD	North Caucasus Federal District
n.d.	no date
OMON	Otriad mobilnyi osobogo naznacheniiia (Special Purpose Mobile Units)
PMC	Private Military Company

PVE	Prevention of Violent Extremism
RATS	Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure
Roskomnadzor	Federalnaia sluzhba po nadzory v sfere sviazi, informatsionnykh tekhnologii i massovykh kommunikatsii (Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information and Mass Media)
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SOBR	Spetsialnyi otriad bystrogo reagirovaniia (Special Rapid Response Units)
SORM	Sistema operativno-razysknykh meropriatii (System for Operatives Investigation Activities)
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNOCT	United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
USD	US dollars

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Preface

This report on Russia's international cooperation on counter-terrorism is produced within the framework of the Russia and Eurasia Studies Programme (Russian Foreign, Defence and Security Policy) at the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). The programme provides analyses for the Swedish Ministry of Defence and focuses on research in Russian security studies; military, economic and domestic affairs, including the developments in the North Caucasus and counter-terrorism; and Russia's neighbours.

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Project Leader for the Russia and Eurasia Studies Programme, FOI.
Stockholm, February 2020.

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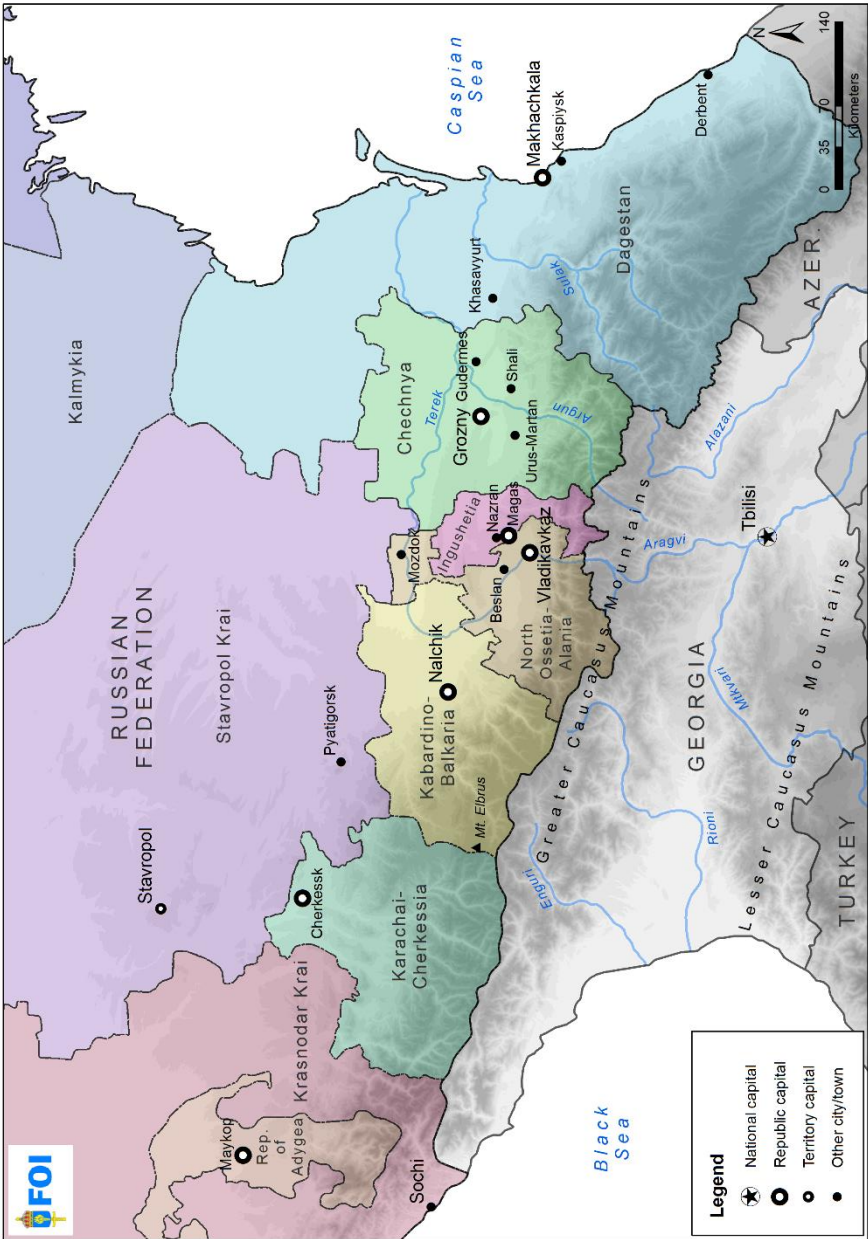
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Needless to say, the author bears the responsibility for the text.

Jakob Hedenskog, Author
Stockholm, February 2020

Map over the North Caucasus



Map provided by Per Wikström, FOI

1 Introduction

In his address to the Federal Assembly on 15 January 2020, President Vladimir Putin declared that there is no longer a “hotbed of international terrorism in the North Caucasus” (President of Russia, 2020). For more than 25 years, Russian authorities have been countering first Chechen separatism and, later, Islamist Jihadism in the North Caucasus. Counter-terrorism in the North Caucasus is also very much connected to the coming to power of President Vladimir Putin. The Second Chechen War (1999–2000) paralleled his rise to power, first as prime minister, then as acting president, and finally as president of Russia, and did much to boost his legitimacy and support (Hedenskog, 2013:121–122).

From the beginning and particularly since the terror attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 (hereafter 9/11), Russia has emphasised that its counter-terrorist efforts in the North Caucasus are part of the international fight against terrorism. Moscow has increasingly stressed the importance of its inclusion in international cooperation on counter-terrorism. Since the start of Russia’s intervention in the war in Syria, 30 September 2015, which was officially presented as an anti-terrorism operation, Russia has also exposed itself more broadly to international terrorism abroad. One example was the terror attack caused by a bomb on a Russian civilian airplane over the Sinai in October 2015, killing all 224 aboard.

Russia’s collaboration on counter-terrorism is today mainly conducted within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) framework. As the issue of combating terrorism has moved higher up on the global agenda, particularly after 9/11, the Russian government has also increased its involvement in the international counter-terrorism structures within the United Nations (UN) as well as in other forums. But what are the driving forces behind Russia’s approach?

The objective of this study is to provide an overview of Russia’s key interests in the international counter-terrorism domain. The research questions are: What interests is Russia pushing within the various international counter-terrorism structures? Through what means are these interests being promoted? To what extent are Russia’s interests coordinated with other states? As we shall see, Russia prefers to cooperate with other authoritarian states, such as China, on counter-terrorism. Although there is a worldwide consensus on the need to fight terrorism, individual countries differ in their aims, sources, targets, and strategies, which makes deeper cooperation on counter-terrorism difficult.

This report gives examples of how Russian diplomacy works closely with law enforcement in strengthening the authoritarian Russian regime, in general, and, more specifically, in the fight against terrorism. The report is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 gives a background to the modern history of terrorism in Russia, with emphasis on the developments in Chechnya and the North Caucasus.

Chapter 3 discusses the measures taken by Russian authorities in order to fight terrorism, and offers different explanations for the drastic decline of the insurgency-related violence in the North Caucasus after 2013. The reason for the rather extensive literature (Chapter 3) on Russia's curbing of terrorism in the North Caucasus is that the Russian leadership often refers to its "successes" at home as a reason for its claims for aspiring to a leadership role in the international cooperation on counter-terrorism. Chapter 4 discusses Russia's international counter-terrorism agenda, and Chapter 5 examines Russia's international cooperation in counter-terrorism organisations, with focus on the SCO and various counter-terrorism organisations within the UN. Chapter 6 scrutinises Russia's primary interests in the international cooperation on counter-terrorism. In the seventh and final chapter, some conclusions of the study are drawn.

The report's sources are mostly textual, including both Russian and Western primary and secondary sources, such as news articles, official documents, Internet sources, and research reports. To a limited extent, interviews from various visits to Moscow (June 2017 and May 2018), with experts on the situation in the North Caucasus and on terrorism, as well as to the United Nations, New York (August 2018), with diplomats and experts on international terrorism, have been used as supplementary sources.

2 **Roots of Terrorism in the North Caucasus**

The armed conflict in the North Caucasus has posed a challenge for Russia for more than 25 years. Ideologically, the conflict has undergone three main phases of transformation. The First Chechen War (1994–96) was primarily driven by the secular Chechen elites’ secessionism. After the 1996 killing of Dzhokhar Dudayev, the first Chechen separatist leader, in a Russian special forces operation, the self-proclaimed “Chechen Republic of Ichkeria” started to transform itself into a radical Islamist project. Thus, the Second Chechen War (1999–2000) was driven more by Islamist motives. Following a gradual process of Islamization, the Chechen insurgents had fully adopted Salafist-Jihadist ideology by 2007.¹ In October that year, their leader, Doku Umarov, proclaimed himself to be the “Emir” of the new “Caucasus Emirate” (CE). Chechnya was to be one province (*vilayat*), among others, of the “Emirate”, which would encompass all the republics of the Russian North Caucasus (Hedenskog et al., 2018: 21–24). The CE was organised as a loosely connected set of local groups of radical Islamist insurgents (*jamaats*), which together formed a regional network (Moore, 2015: 401).

The Second Chechen War was significantly more brutal than the first, with the radical wing of the Chechen insurgency actively resorting to terrorism. According to the Caucasian Knot (*Kavkazskii Uzel*), between the years 2000 and 2018 no less than 86 terrorist acts were committed on the territory of the Russian Federation, with the participation of a total of 132 suicide bombers, including 52 women. As a result of these acts of terror, almost all with a connection to the situation in the North Caucasus, 1,325 people died and more than 3,282 were injured (Kavkazskii Uzel 2018b).²

In 2002, the armed conflict began to spill over the Chechen borders, due to outflows of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and as a reaction to the security operations across the region. The insurgency gradually changed scope and focus from being a local Chechen struggle to a North Caucasus-wide cause. In June 2004, there were major raids on fighters in Ingushetia, when for a few hours they

¹ The Salafist, or Salafi, movement is a conservative movement within Sunni Islam, and advocates a return to the traditions of the *Salaf*, the first three generations of Muslims, which they preach as the unadulterated, pure form of Islam.

² Among the most deadly terror acts were the attacks on the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow, in October 2002; on two domestic airplanes that had taken off from the Domodedovo airport in Moscow, in August 2004; on school No 1 in Beslan, North Ossetia, in September 2004; on the Nevsky Express fast train between Saint Petersburg and Moscow, in November 2009; in the Moscow metro, in March 2010; on Domodedovo Airport in Moscow, in January 2011; and the three separate suicide bombings in Volgograd, in October and December 2013. The suspected perpetrator of the April 2017 suicide bombing in the Petersburg metro, claimed by an Al-Qaeda-affiliated group, was from Central Asia, however, and had no known links to the North Caucasus.

took three cities under control; in October 2005, part of the Salafi community in Kabardino-Balkaria took up arms and attacked the republican capital of Nalchik. In 2006–2008, Ingushetia was riven by a full-blown guerrilla conflict; and by 2009 Dagestan became the epicentre of the conflict-related violence and the main exporter of suicide bombers in Russia (Sokirianskaia, 2019: 13).

Starting in December 2014, the armed insurgency experienced its third reincarnation. Middle-level commanders of the Caucasus Emirate began publicly switching their allegiance from the Emirate leader Aliaskhab Kebekov to the Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, following al-Baghdadi and his group's declaration of a Caliphate earlier in the year. The Caucasus Emirate continued to operate independently, but suffered further high-profile losses, including the killing by Russian security forces of Kebekov in April 2015, and his successor, Magomed Suleymanov, months later. By late 2015, the insurgents still operating in Russia's North Caucasus republics had largely unified under IS's Caucasus Province (Hedenskog et al., 2018: 24).³

Traditionally, there have been two schools of explanation for the roots of the terrorism in the North Caucasus. One school points primarily at the Chechen and North Caucasus insurgency movement's international links to the al-Qaeda. In connection to the 9/11 attacks, Russian authorities started to point out Chechen insurgents' intimate links to al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. According to Russian diplomats, dozens of Chechens in the service of the Taliban took part in the Afghan War against coalition forces in 2001; however, it was soon revealed that rumours of Chechens fighting in the ranks of the Taliban or captured by the Americans were ungrounded (Souleimanov, 2017: 17). Some foreigners, particularly from the Arab world, had joined the Chechen separatist movement and fought the two Chechen wars. Probably the most notable was the Saudi Jihadist Ibn al-Khattab, who in August 1999, along with Chechen Shamil Basayev, led the incursion into Dagestan, which effectively led to the start of the Second Chechen War. However, the inflow of both fighters and funding to the insurgency from the outside world to the North Caucasus had never been substantial and dwindled even more after the Second Chechen War (Moore, 2015: 401–406).

While the proponents of the international paradigm tend to prevail in Russia, it has been widely criticised in Western academic and expert circles, who point out the domestic roots of terrorism in Russia. These experts claim there is little evidence that the Chechen or North Caucasians are in any close alliance with al-Qaeda, nor that they participate in any large numbers in Taliban groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, or in other such groups (Ratalle, 2015: 7–10).

³ From 2015 to 2018, the Islamic State officially claimed at least 27 terror attacks in Russia, including the downing of the Russian passenger plane over Sinai, Egypt, on 31 October 2015. While most of the attacks occurred in the North Caucasus, IS also claimed responsibility for acts of terror in the Moscow and Astrakhan oblasts, as well as in St. Petersburg, Surgut (Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug), and Nizhny Novgorod (Sokirianskaia, 2019: 14).

As for the root causes of terrorism in the North Caucasus, these experts point instead to the regional insurgency as essentially being a home-grown phenomenon drawing on grievances over the Stalin-era deportation of the Chechen people during the Second World War.⁴ Also, social injustice, religious intolerance, unpopular elites, and the erosion of traditional values are pointed out as possible root causes of terrorism in the North Caucasus (Ratalle, 2015: 7–10; Souleimanov, 2017: 22–26; Sokirianskaia, 2019: 16–30). Since the 1990s, until the decline of the Caucasus Emirate, the North Caucasus insurgency was basically funded from the region itself. Chechen organised crime groups in Moscow provided some start-up funding for the Chechen independence movement, but in the 2000s, as the armed conflict took an increasingly ideological Islamist, as opposed to nationalistic, tone, the emerging terrorist criminal enterprises turned to drug trafficking, making Chechnya (and the wider Caucasus area) a major regional hub for narcotics flows from Afghanistan to Europe. Oil smuggling, extortion, kidnapping, and robberies, as well as *jizya* (“tax on infidels”) were also common methods used (Zabyelina, 2018: 63–73).

⁴ On 23 February 1944, the Soviet authorities deported the entire Chechen and Ingush peoples (in total approx. 380,000 people) to Central Asia, on suspicion of their collaboration with the Germans, and liquidated the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Other peoples in the North Caucasus who also suffered from deportations were Karachai, in November 1943, and Balkars, in March 1944 (King 2008: 196–197).

3 Russian Counter-Terrorism in the North Caucasus

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was often accused of sponsoring international terrorism in different parts of the world (Crozier, 2005: 202–203). As for the domestic terrorist threat, post-Soviet Russia largely inherited the Soviet-era structures of counter-terrorism institutions. The anti-terrorism office of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) became the direct successor of the same department within the Soviet Union's main security service, the Committee of State Security (KGB), responsible for the fight against terrorism. Many officers of the contemporary security organs continue to rely on Soviet-style work methods, and believe in the effectiveness of a security model emphasising short-term, reactive, and coercive responses, instead of exploring alternative long-term measures for preventing the threat of terrorism. The scope of Russia's counter-terrorism measures has therefore been confined to military operations and the efforts of security services. This follows from the Russian understanding of terrorism as an attack on the state, rather than an assault on individual rights. In Russia, subsequently, concerns over human rights have always receded to the background of counter-terrorism planning and operations (Omelicheva 2009).

This priority of the state's interest and the relative indifference to human losses led to high numbers of casualties among civilians, servicemen, and policemen, particularly during the first terror attacks (Vatchagaev, 2019: 78–79). The initial response from the Russian anti-terrorist forces during the hostage crises in Budennovsk, Stavropol Krai, in June 1995; the Dubrovka Theatre, Moscow, October 2002; and the school in Beslan, North Ossetia, in September 2004; all led to high numbers of casualties. During the Dubrovka Theatre siege and in Beslan, Russian anti-terrorist forces not only killed the terrorists but also hundreds of the hostages. At Dubrovka, where the terrorists had taken more than 800 people hostage, the anti-terrorist forces used *carfentanil*, an opioid 10,000 times more powerful than morphine, which became responsible for the deaths of not only the terrorists but also of 130 of the hostages. In Beslan, the FSB forces undertook a counterattack, which resulted in a chaotic exchange of fire between them and the terrorists, and killing 335 of the hostages, most of them schoolchildren (Cohen, 2014: 50–52; Little, 2018).

After the Second Chechen War, the command of what the Kremlin insisted was an anti-terrorist operation in Chechnya, from 1 May 2000, had initially been placed under the Ministry of Defence (MO), but with the subsiding of high-intensity fighting was transferred to the FSB in 2001, and then, in 2003, to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). From 2003, Moscow had also gradually adopted the policy of "Chechenization", in order to pacify the Chechen Republic. The aim of this policy was to let the Moscow-controlled regional authorities in Chechnya –

first under Ahmad Kadyrov (assassinated in 2004) and then, from 2007, under his son Ramzan – use the private army, the “Kadyrovtsy”, to take on the responsibility for fighting insurgents (Hedenskog et al., 2018: 22). Both father and son Kadyrov had fought the Russian forces during the First Chechen War and supported Dudayev, but during the Second Chechen War switched sides and declared allegiance to Russia.

The federal units of the MVD gradually shifted the burden of policing to local law enforcement and the Kadyrovtsy, which meant that Moscow de facto surrendered physical control over Chechnya to local hands. The transfer of command functions contributed to a shift in focus from wide-scale operations to more rigorous intelligence-gathering and seek-and-destroy operations, which killed a number of senior terrorist commanders. Numerous cases of torture, kidnapping, and even extrajudicial executions were documented by human rights organisations in Chechnya (see Section 3.2).

On 6 March 2006, a new federal law, “On Counteracting Terrorism”, offered quite a different definition of terrorism than the previous law from 1998, which it replaced, now with a strong emphasis on terrorism as something aimed at the state. The earlier policy had defined it as something directed at civilians (Soldatov and Borogan, 2011: 182). The new law also established a National Antiterrorism Committee (NAK), chaired by the FSB director, to centralise control over counter-terrorism efforts in line with Putin’s larger efforts to form a top-down hierarchy that subordinated political and economic processes in Russia under the Kremlin. With its new responsibilities for counter-terrorism policy, the FSB had the right, in some cases, to command army units, including the right to issue orders to shoot down airplanes, if necessary. In the past, there had been little coordination between Russia’s law enforcement agencies, particularly the FSB and MVD. The 2006 law also allowed the FSB to tap telephone conversations and monitor electronic communications in areas where it conducts anti-terrorist operations. Critics argued that the law was vague enough to be used against any group that annoyed the government (Ortung, 2006: 7). Also in 2006, Russia’s security services, including the FSB, were given the legal power to hunt down and kill terrorism suspects overseas, if ordered to do so by the president (Finn, 2006).

After some time, these harsh anti-terrorist methods started to obtain results. On 16 April 2009, the so-called anti-terrorist operation in Chechnya was finally terminated. However, unprecedentedly high levels of violence continued in the surrounding republics, particularly in Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Due to efforts taken to curb the terrorist threat prior to the 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, the level of violence from the Islamist insurgent movement started to fall there as well, first rather slowly but, after a while, substantially. From 2013 to 2014, the number of people killed or injured due to insurgency-related violence in the North Caucasus decreased by almost half (see Figure 3.1).

3.1 Factors explaining the decline of the insurgency

According to Emil Souleimanov, there were four main factors that explain the gradual decline of the North Caucasus insurgency in the years after 2010. The first factor was *the selective targeting* by Russian and local counter-insurgents of the insurgents' local support base, including the relatives of the insurgents. Over time, this controversial practice, already well-proven in Chechnya in the early 2000s, prompted many locals across the North Caucasus to withhold support from the insurgents, as relatives of Chechen insurgency commanders were kidnapped. The commanders were forced either to capitulate, defect, or face the killing of their relatives. The increased use of *zachistkas*, or mop-ups, which were carried out by Kadyrovtsy with the aim of identifying the members of the insurgent units as well as locating stores of weapons and ammunition, became a continuous phenomenon, as did routine forced disappearances (Souleimanov, 2015: 100).

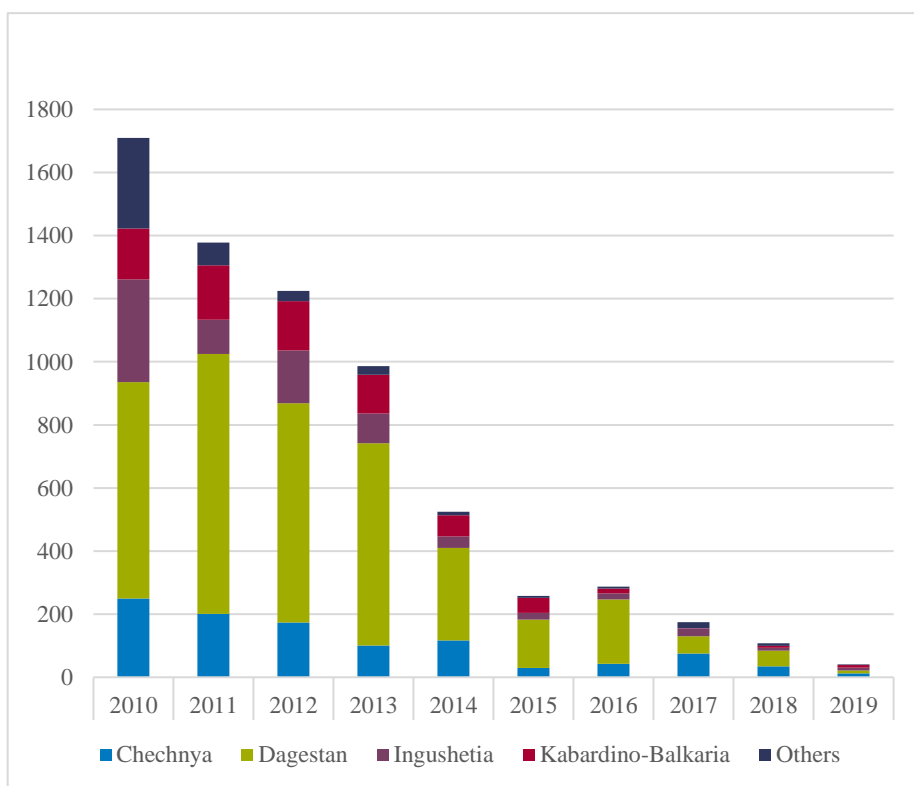


Figure 3.1: The total number of victims (killed and injured) of insurgency-related violence in the North Caucasus 2010–2019, by region. The statistics include civilians, personnel of armed and security forces, and insurgents. The graph is based on statistical data, presented in the Appendix. Source: Kavkazskii Uzel 2013–2020. For a full list of sources, see the end of the report.

The second factor was *the deployment of elite counter-insurgent forces* and many units in special operations, and the withdrawal of counter-insurgency operations from local police forces known for their incompetence and corruption. From around 2012, the Russian authorities utilised a number of tactical innovations, particularly in Dagestan, which since some years had transformed to the crucial epicentre of the Caucasus Emirate's insurgency, to facilitate the deployment of violence aimed at the insurgents and their supporters. Most importantly, elite counter-insurgency forces were increasingly deployed in combat across the North Caucasus, including Special Rapid Response Units (SOBR) of the MVD; the Special Purpose Mobile Units (OMON) of the regional branches of the MVD, from 2016 included in the National Guard; and the counter-insurgency forces of the FSB. The need to deploy units of elite counterinsurgency forces became apparent on the eve of the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, just a few hundred kilometres away (Souleimanov, 2017: 47).

The third factor that led to the decline of the insurgency was *the infiltration by counter-insurgent agents of insurgent groups*, resulting in their subsequent decapitation. Since early 2010, this method led to the substantial weakening of locally operating Jihadist groups, because the loss of experienced leaders sufficiently affected the Jihadists' capability to operate effectively (Hedenskog et al., 2018: 24). These efforts led to the killing of the leadership of the Caucasus Emirate by Russian special forces, as mentioned above.

Following this, the fourth factor that led to the decline of the insurgency was *the volunteering of thousands of North Caucasian insurgents* to fight in the Syrian Civil War, far away from their native region. The decapitation of the leadership accelerated an on-going split within the Caucasus Emirate, a loosely organised group, when leading commanders started publicly switching allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) and prompted many of the North Caucasian insurgents to travel to Syria or Iraq. The Caucasus Emirate continued to operate independently, but by late 2015 the insurgents still operating in Russia's North Caucasus republics had largely unified under IS's Caucasus Province (*Vilayat Kavkaz*) (Hedenskog et al., 2018: 24). This, in turn, reduced the share of prospective recruits to locally operating insurgent groups (Souleimanov, 2017: xxvi–xxvii).

The numbers of foreign troops fighting in different Islamist groups in Syria were difficult to estimate and varied over time. According to the FSB Director, Aleksandr Bortnikov, in 2015, some 2,000 Russian citizens, presumably of North Caucasian origin, had left for Syria to fight in the civil war. In March 2016, the MVD claimed the number to be “exactly 3,417 [sic!],” while Meduza, citing sources from the same ministry, claimed it to be “no less than 5,000” (Turovskii, 2016). In 2017, President Vladimir Putin, citing intelligence sources, mentioned the number 4,000, from Russia, and a further 5,000 nationals from other post-Soviet states (TASS, 2017).

Jihadists from the North Caucasus, as from other parts of Russia and the former Soviet Union, share the Russian language, which became the third language within IS, after Arabic and English (Turovskii, 2016). Reportedly, some Chechens eventually even served in the top rank of IS (Arutunyan, 2018)⁵ The label “al-Shishani”, the Arabic term for “Chechen”, was often adopted by fighters from the region, not only from Chechnya itself. In fact, some of the most well-known members of the “Chechen” community fighting in Syria actually originated from the Pankisi Gorge in northern Georgia. They were members of the Kist people, a sub-ethnic Chechen community, speaking a dialect of the Nakh language, which they share with the Chechen and Ingush peoples (Moore, 2015: 407–408).⁶ Apart from IS, some 1,000 Russian citizens also served in other Islamist groups in Syria, such as the al-Qaeda faction *Jabhat al-Nusra*, later to be known as *Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham* (Turovskii, 2016). Also, pro-Kadyrov Chechen forces have fought on the Syrian government side in the war (Mironova and Sergatskova, 2017).

There are indications that the Russian authorities not only did not prevent Russian citizens from the North Caucasus to travel to Syria, but that, in fact, the FSB actually opened the border for radicals, and even encouraged them to leave Russia for Syria before the Sochi Olympics (ICG, 2016: 16). According to Reuters’ interviews with former IS Jihadists from Dagestan, the FSB, in some cases, even offered to allow the Jihadists to avoid arrest and gave them new passports, in a new name, with a one-way ticket to Istanbul, from where they could continue to join the IS in Syria. Nevertheless, FSB Director Bortnikov and the local authorities in the North Caucasus blamed the departures on IS recruiters and foreign countries who, allegedly, gave radicals safe passage to Syria and elsewhere (Tsvetkova, 2016). However, as the success of IS in the wars in Syria and Iraq waned, from 2016–2017, concerns were raised about the potential threat of fighters returning to Russia. These concerns, seem, so far, to have been exaggerated. Russian experts estimate that 90 per cent of the defectors have been killed in battle or are stranded without a passport in Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, or other countries in the region. Only some 10 per cent of the defectors have returned to Russia, but those are closely monitored by the security services (author’s interviews, Moscow, June 2017).

⁵ For instance, Tarkhan Batirashvili, better known for his *nom de guerre*, Abu Omar al-Shishani, who was described by the Pentagon as the “IS minister of war”, and Al-Bara Shishani (Cezar Tokhosashvili), described as “IS vice minister of war”. At one point, Batirashvili ran the IS military occupation of Aleppo, where he was later killed in combat, in 2016. Tokhosashvili was arrested in Ukraine in late 2019 (Weiss, 2019; DW, 2019).

⁶ Both Batirashvili and Tokhosashvili, as well as Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, who was assassinated in central Berlin in August 2019, assumedly by the FSB’s anti-terrorist special operation, “Department V”, were of Kist origin and Georgian citizens. Khangoshvili was a former military commander for the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in the Second Chechen War, and a Georgian military officer during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Later on, he allegedly turned to a source for the Georgian intelligence (Bellingcat, 2020; Weiss, 2019)

3.2 Counter-terrorism, human rights, and the responsibility of Vladimir Putin

Much of the insurgency-related violence in the North Caucasus during the 2000s was a legacy of the brutality that characterized the last two Chechen wars. Military operations during both campaigns saw excessive and non-selective use of force by Russian forces, as well as adoption of guerrilla tactics and indiscriminate terrorist attacks by Chechen fighters, which significantly contributed to the cycle of violence throughout the region. During the first stages of the second war, federal troops resorted to massive aerial bombings and shell attack, causing the deaths of thousands of unprotected civilians (Sagramoso, 2007: 699). When conducting counter-insurgency operations, Russian forces and the Kadyrovtsy showed little regard for the lives of innocent civilians trapped in the line of fire. The *zachistkas* were characterized by significant abuses and human rights violations (HRW 2002: 13-18, 26–41). During operations, young men were detained arbitrarily and taken to temporary filtration camps where they were badly tortured and heavily beaten. In many instance, those detained died as a result of torture, while others disappeared, with no trace or record of their whereabouts (Sagramoso, 2007: 699–700). According to one study by Human Rights Watch, from 2004, Kadyrovtsy were responsible for two-thirds of these abductions and federal troops for the other third (Abdullaev and Saradzhyan, 2008: 156–157). Extrajudicial executions, torture, and abuse, including sexual abuse, became widespread phenomena engulfing the activities of both the Russian troops and their Chechen allies (HRW, 2005). Often, the counter-terrorism operatives used disproportionate force to kill, rather than capture, insurgents (ICG, 2012: 24). This disproportionateness is indicated in Figure 3.2, which shows that the total number of those killed exceeds the total number of those injured, except for the first year (2010).

The extensive human rights report, “International Tribunal on Chechnya” (2009), produced by a Russian human rights activist group, argues that Vladimir Putin, as both President of Russia and Commander-in-Chief during the period of 1 January 2000 to 7 May 2008, was *de facto* and *de jure* in charge of all armed and security forces on the territory of the Russian Federation. As such, he was also responsible, according to international law and national legislation, for following international humanitarian norms, fixed in international treaties of the Russian Federation, such as the Geneva Convention, of 1949 (Dmitrevskii, 2009: 473).

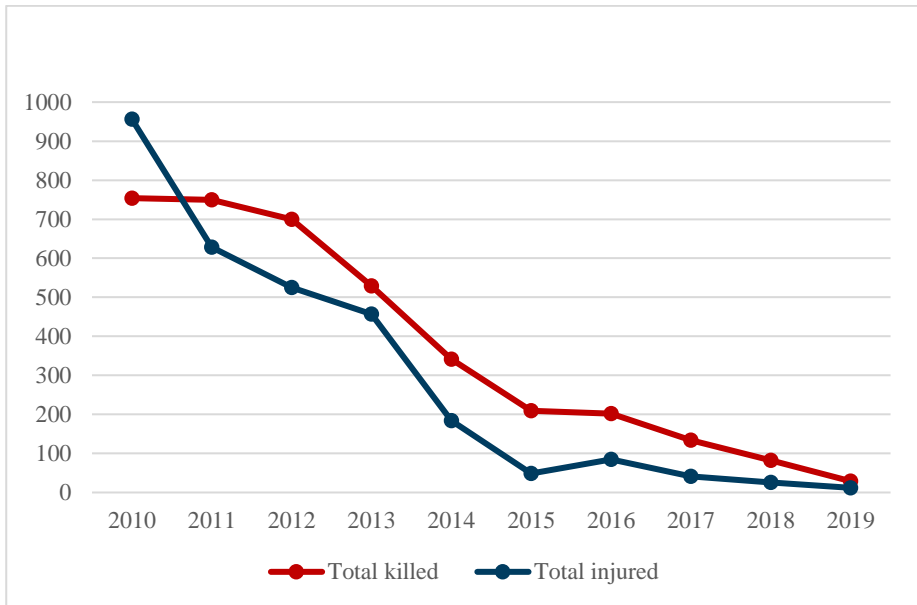


Figure 3.2: The proportion of those killed and injured in the insurgency-related violence in the North Caucasus 2010–2019. The statistics include both civilians, personnel of Russian armed and security forces, as well as insurgents. The graph is based on statistical data, presented in the Appendix. Source: Kavkazskii Uzel 2013–2020. For a full list of sources, see the end of the report.

3.3 Soft approaches to counter-terrorism

Besides counter-insurgency operations, Moscow has also during these years taken various measures to raise the living standard in the North Caucasus and make the insurgency's recruitment more difficult. Ahead of the Sochi Olympics, which were propagated not least as a regional development project, new resorts and winter sports centres were to be built in all of the North Caucasus republics. In parallel to that, Moscow launched a large development programme for the North Caucasus for 2013 to 2025, with investments originally estimated to be 125 billion USD, ten times more than the federal budget for the North Caucasus Federal District (Hedenskog, 2013: 188). Although the level of federal investments was drastically cut by almost half, the programme was regarded as unrealistic rather soon, not least because of the faltering Russian economy. Also, large parts of the ski resort programme were abandoned. Altogether, the Kremlin's hopes of attracting private investment as a means of pacifying the region were disappointed (Halbach and Isaeva, 2015: 8). This was made even more difficult by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas, which put Russia under international sanctions.

Various efforts have also been made regarding the North Caucasus – particularly in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria – by republican governments and through local activities to develop programmes and preventive

projects in the framework of the federally defined priorities. The Russian term used to describe the efforts associated with the prevention of radicalisation is *profilaktika* (prevention). This stipulates measures that are designed to prevent youth, or other vulnerable groups and communities, from being radicalised into violence, by creating and increasing resilience to the ideologies of terrorism and extremism, such as by creating counter-narratives. There seems to have been varying results. The largest-scale preventive works have unfolded in Chechnya, but they have been largely criticized as uncreative and, sometimes, threatening. Much emphasis seems to have been placed on praising Ramzan Kadyrov and on trying to deter and control the youth. Official counter-narratives in the other republics, have been much softer, more nuanced, and less politicised, compared to Chechnya. Soft-power approaches have been tested in Dagestan (2010–2012) and Ingushetia (since 2008), which liberalized the state's attitude towards Salafi communities and launched efforts to increase their dialogue with them. The intensity of ideological work is lower in Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria, compared to Chechnya and Dagestan, which is probably due to the lower intensity of conflict there. Kabardino-Balkaria is the only republic that has created a ministerial position for extremism prevention (Sokorianskaia, 2019: 2–3).

4 Russia's International Counter-Terrorism Agenda

During President Putin's address to the United Nations General Assembly on 28 September 2015, he called for the creation of a "genuinely broad coalition against terrorism". The speech served as a useful pretext for the beginning of a Russian operation against rebels of various persuasion in Syria only two days later (President of Russia, 2015). This call for an international coalition against terrorism was also highlighted in the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (Russian Security Council, 2015), in December the same year, and in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, of 2016 (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016).

Based on its experience in counter-terrorism at home, as well as in Syria, Russia is increasingly using counter-terrorism pretexts as a tool to enhance its international influence and cooperation in other parts of the world, particularly in Africa. Support in countering terrorism has often been part of the more than 20 military cooperation agreements Russia has signed with African states since 2015. In Africa, Russian counter-terrorism support tends to come in two ways: either openly or unofficially. The open way is thorough military-technical cooperation, including anti-terrorist training programs offered by the Russian side.⁷ The unofficial way could be through the deployment of mercenaries or private military companies (PMC), as well as under-cover training, which could also include anti-terrorism, of local personnel/militia who are loyal to the ruling elites (Hedenskog, 2018: 34–38; Sukhankin, 2020).⁸

Thus, Russia has demonstrated a pro-active domestic counter-terrorism effort, and has stated a desire to create an international anti-terrorism coalition with the West. However, some experts question the sincerity of Russia's fight against terrorism in Syria, given that Russia allowed many domestic terrorists to travel to Syria, which, as mentioned, contributed to a general lowering of the level of violence in the North Caucasus (Hedenskog and Persson, 2019: 86).

As a matter of fact, some experts, such as Anna Borshchevskaya, claim that Russia – from Syria to Afghanistan – has done more to encourage terrorism than fight it, with Moscow maintaining ties to terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and the Taliban. Soon after Putin's Syria intervention, Hezbollah and Moscow reportedly

⁷ As an example, Nigeria has since 2014 repeatedly requested Russian military hardware to fight Boko Haram and counter-terrorism training for its special forces. From 2019, this has also included Russia's support in anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Guinea.

⁸ The group usually mentioned is PMC Wagner, which is allegedly sponsored by the Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin (who is closely associated with Putin) and which in recent years has been deployed in countries such as Sudan, Central African Republic, Mozambique, and Libya. Wagner's allegedly close ties to the Russian military intelligence service (GRU) and the Ministry of Defence, have led many analysts to question whether Wagner is really a PMC or rather a GRU special force (Dahlqvist 2019).

established joint operations rooms in Latakia and Damascus. Although it was in November 2015 that they began to “officially” work together to establish communications channels and possibly coordinate military operations in Syria, the first Hezbollah delegation had visited Moscow back in 2011. More recent reports indicate that Hezbollah has even been fighting alongside Russian troops in Syria (Borshchevskaya, 2017). In contrast to the US Department of State, Russia does not recognise Hezbollah as terrorist group.

As for Afghanistan, the first unofficial contacts between Russia and the Taliban, a listed terrorist entity, even by Russia, were established in the second half of the 1990s. The Taliban defeated the government of the Mujahedeen in Kabul, in April 1996, and sought international recognition for their regime (Dubnov, 2018). For Moscow, the war in Afghanistan has morphed several times, from being primarily the theatre of the US’s global war on terrorism, or a US-Taliban war, into being a proxy war that not only involves the US and the Taliban but also key powers and neighbours such as India, Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia.⁹ Whatever happens in Afghanistan has repercussions in both South and Central Asia, as well as in international relations and security as a whole. Russia’s rapprochement with Pakistan, since 2013, as well as its actual support to the Taliban through intelligence-sharing and arms deliveries, on the claim that the Taliban are the ones fighting IS, show that Moscow is de facto using the Taliban and Afghanistan as a theatre for an anti-American proxy war (Hedenskog et al., 2019: 18). By strengthening relations with the Taliban, which is fighting the government of Ashraf Ghani, a close US ally, Moscow is seeking to become an important player in conflict resolution in Afghanistan. Moscow is also often accused of exaggerating the threat that Afghanistan poses for Central Asia, where it seeks to increase its military presence and keep post-Soviet countries in the Russian sphere of interest (Dubnov, 2018).

Furthermore, Russia’s war in Eastern Ukraine since 2014 has also led to accusations of supporting terrorists and an application by Ukraine to the International Court of Justice (ICJ): Ukraine claimed that Russia had violated its obligations under two international treaties on the financing of terrorism and on racial discrimination. In November 2019, the ICJ found that it can entertain Ukraine’s claim under the International Convention for Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism. Ukraine alleged that Russia supplied funds, weapons, and training to illegal armed groups that engage in acts of terrorism on the territory of Ukraine (UN News, 2019). Relatedly, among other violent acts, the Dutch Joint Investigation Team (JIT) convincingly tied Russian government officials, militaries, and security service personnel to the July 2014 downing, with a Russian BUK missile, of Malaysian Airlines MH17 over the Donetsk region in eastern Ukraine, killing

⁹ In February 2020, the US and the Taliban reached an agreement, which could be the first step to achieving a lasting peace in Afghanistan after more than eighteen years of war.

all 298 aboard (Politie, 2019). Thus, Russia is not only a financier and instigator of terrorism in Ukraine, but a perpetrator as well.

4.1 Abortive bilateral Russia-US cooperation

9/11 not only opened up for international cooperation on counter-terrorism, particularly within the UN, but also bilaterally between Russia and the US. Russian President Putin was one of the first foreign leaders to speak on the phone directly to President Bush. During the call, he expressed his condolences to the president and the American people and his unequivocal support for whatever responses the American president might decide to take. After 9/11, the US substantially softened its critique of Russia's harsh counter-terrorist methods in Chechnya and called on the Chechens to unconditionally cut all contacts with international terrorist groups, such as Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda (The White House, 2001). The US war in Iraq in 2003, however, closed any hopes of a closer coalition between Russia and the US on counter-terrorism.

In any case, in 2011, the US Department of State listed the Caucasus Emirate as a terrorist organisation, a move that was welcomed by the Kremlin in the hope of further cooperation. Furthermore, a second window of opportunity seemed to open as a result of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, performed by the two Chechen brothers Tsarnayev, but the opportunity was again smashed by the overall, and growing, crisis in US-Russia relations over Ukraine, and subsequently, the major policy differences in terms of waging war in Syria (Suchkov, 2018: 315–316).

As established above, Moscow's and Washington's respective wars on terror differ significantly in their motives, aims, targets, and strategies, and even on who the enemy is, which dims the prospects for cooperation. In Syria, for example, the US wants to defeat IS because it is an engine of international terrorism, while Russia is fighting the group mainly because it is an enemy of President Bashar al-Assad, whose regime Moscow saved from collapse. Differences such as these explain why Russian-US cooperation in Syria has been limited to "de-confliction" and avoiding accidents, while the two sides' aims in combating terrorism, and even their definitions of what constitutes a "terrorist threat", continue to diverge (Clarke, 2018).¹⁰ When US troops, on President Trump's orders, left Northern Syria in October 2019, Russian forces triumphantly took over the abandoned American outposts (Hubbard et al., 2019).

¹⁰ A serious incident that involved both American troops and Russian mercenaries occurred on 7 February 2018, when the US-led coalition to fight IS delivered massive air and artillery strikes on Syrian government forces near the town of Khasham, Deir ez-Zor governorate, in Eastern Syria. While the Russian high command in Syria had assured the Americans that Russian troops were not among the Syrian government troops, nothing was said about the presence of Russian mercenaries, probably belonging to Wagner PMC. Russian officials acknowledged that only four Russian citizens – but perhaps dozens more – had been killed. Unconfirmed sources estimated 200 to 300 members of the "pro-regime force" were killed in the strike (Gibbons-Neff, 2018).

5 **Russia's International Cooperation in Counter-Terrorism Organisations**

Russia cooperates on counter-terrorism in different organisations. Two of these organisations were created by Russia and other post-Soviet states after the fall of the Soviet Union: the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The CIS founded an Anti-Terrorism Center (ATC) in Moscow in 2000. The members have agreed on information-sharing, improving security arrangements, joint training for anti-terrorism efforts, command and control coordination, and anti-terrorism rapid deployment operations (CIS ATC n.d.). The CSTO – with member states Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan – concentrates on joint deployment of forces, nominally for counter-terrorist operations, in the European, Central Asian, and Far Eastern regions (Ryhtik, 2006: 171). Since 2017, annual anti-terrorist exercises, previously held under CSTO auspices, have been coordinated by the CIS ATC. The main reason for this is probably a wish to include Uzbekistan in the exercises (Kucera, 2017). Uzbekistan is a member of the CIS, but not the CSTO, and is one of the only two CIS members bordering Afghanistan, the other one being Tajikistan.

Russia is also one of the founding members, with 28 other states and the European Union, of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). According to the latter's website, the organisation develops good practices and tools, for policymakers and practitioners, to strengthen civilian counter-terrorism capabilities, national strategies, action plans, and training modules. It provides a forum where national counter-terrorism officials and practitioners can meet with their counterparts from different regions to share experience, expertise, strategies, tools, capacity needs, and capacity-building programs (GCTF n.d.).

5.1 **The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation**

Russia's most important regional partner organisation, when it comes to counter-terrorism, is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). With its eight member states – China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – it is the largest regional organisation in the world in terms of geographical coverage and population, covering three-fifths of the Eurasian continent and nearly half of the world's population.

The SCO has two main executive organs: the SCO Secretariat, located in Beijing, whose head is nominated by the Council of Heads of State; and the SCO Regional

Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which is responsible for the implementation of SCO counter-terrorism strategies. Based in Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent, RATS facilitates cooperation between the domestic security agencies of the member states. This involves the coordination of special operations and information collection and sharing, including maintenance of a database on terrorist, separatist, and extremist organisations, their members, and associated individuals. Most importantly, RATS participates in the preparations for joint anti-terrorist exercises and special operations (FIDH, 2012: 8; author's interviews, Moscow, May 2018).

The SCO's core principle is the one of mutual recognition. Its 2005 Concept of Cooperation requires member states to mutually recognise acts of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, regardless of whether the legislation of each SCO member state includes the act in the same category of crimes or whether it describes it using the same terminology. The SCO member states are supposed to implement national legislation in accordance with the SCO legal framework. However, the latter is vague and does not comply with international standards (FIDH, 2012: 9–10). The lack of precise definitions of the subject matter at the core of SCO's existence is questionable from a legal point of view. Crucially, this opens the door to a wide range of interpretations, some of which may be used to facilitate human rights violations. Under the SCO Convention on Counter-terrorism of 2009, terrorism is defined as an “ideology of violence”, connecting it with extremism and separatism. This definition, referred to in the 2001 Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Extremism and Separatism as the theory of “three evils”, was initially proposed by the Chinese authorities to justify counter-terrorism measures to repress separatist groups in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Republic, a province in northwestern China, and other minorities in China. The same approach was then replicated at the SCO level. Moreover, a number of SCO documents imply that an individual whom a SCO member state may not have accused, but merely suspected, of being a member of a terrorist organisation, must also be recognised as such by other SCO states (FIDH, 2012: 9–10). This makes it practically impossible for such an individual to seek asylum in another SCO member state.

Russia has been a leader, together with China, in the development of the SCO and leveraged the SCO's core principle of mutual recognition as a way to harmonise Russian domestic counter-terrorism practices within the region. SCO's definition of terrorism draws parallels to the Russian definition of terrorism laid out in its 2006 federal law, “On Counteracting Terrorism”, which in its basic concept defines terrorism as “the ideology of violence and the practice of influencing the adoption of a decision by state power bodies, local self-government bodies or international organizations connected with intimidation of the population and (or) other forms of unlawful violent actions” (Federal law, 2006).

5.2 The United Nations

Since 9/11, the fight against terrorism has become a key priority of the international community and has garnered unprecedented levels of cooperation amongst the United Nations member states.

The primary UN resolution on counter-terrorism is the Security Council's Resolution (UNSCR) 1373 (2001), adopted on 28 September 2001. It is a binding resolution, requiring all UN members to report to the Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC), which was created by the resolution, on their progress on its implementation: in preventing and suppressing the financing of terrorist acts, and in preventing, with the use of border controls, the movements of terrorists. The resolution also calls on all states to increase information-sharing efforts and to become parties to all relevant international conventions and protocols (UNSC Resolution 1373).

The Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 8 September 2006. The strategy is a global instrument for enhancing national, regional, and international efforts to counter terrorism. Through its adoption, all member states agreed, for the first time, on a common strategic and operational approach to fighting terrorism, thereby not only sending a clear message that terrorism is unacceptable in all its forms and manifestations, but also resolving to take practical steps, individually and collectively, to prevent and combat it. The GCTS is reviewed every two years; the sixth review was conducted in June 2018, and the next will be carried out in July 2020 (UNOCT n.d.).

Thus, on the general level, the issue of counter-terrorism is a matter of consensus in the UN, but in its daily work the matter is more complicated. To start with, there is no universal definition of "terrorism", although its derived types, national (domestic) and international terrorism, are recognised by the international community (Kuznetsov and Kuznetsov, 2013: 130). In the current UN counter-terrorism architecture, efforts are conducted in competing "silos" of subsidiary organs of the Security Council (UNSC) and the General Assembly (UNGA) that often overlap in their programs and activities. The "silo mentality" is mainly driven by the fundamental division on the question of which body is ultimately responsible for countering terrorism. The General Assembly, because of its universal membership, claims to be the competent organ to deal with terrorism, whereas the Security Council is responsible for maintaining peace and security, which includes countering terrorism. Fundamentally, the UNSC and the UNGA bodies have different mandates when it comes to counter-terrorism. In theory, UNSC bodies such as the CTC and the its Executive Directorate (CTED) are responsible for assessing needs and providing analysis for technical assistance to member states, whereas UNGA bodies such as the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) are responsible for coordination and capacity-building. In practice, this bifurcated system results in competition

amongst the two branches for resources, influence, and project ownership (FIDH, 2017: 5–6).

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia has traditionally advocated that counter-terrorism questions are to be led by the Security Council. Counter-terrorism is considered a “hard” question, which should be handled by states. Russia’s state-centric approach to terrorism makes it sceptical about discussing the prevention of terrorism (see below), which includes the participation of civil society (author’s interviews, UN, August 2018). Russia, however, moderated its focus on the UNSC when the new United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) was established, in 2017, under the Secretary General of the UNGA. Russia insisted that the new Under-Secretary General of the UNOCT had to be a Russian diplomat, Vladimir Voronkov (Author’s interview, UN, August 2018).

Russia has gradually positioned itself to become one of the dominant players in the increasingly important peace and security architecture of the UN, by selecting candidates for important counter-terrorism positions. Apart from Voronkov, several other important positions in the UN counter-terrorism system are also currently held by Russian diplomats, most notably Aleksandr Avanesov, Special Advisor and Manager of the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Global Programme on Prevention of Violent Extremism, PVE (CCCPA, 2018). Furthermore, Russia holds several vice-chairs and other important positions in different committees and working groups on counter-terrorism within the UN (FIDH, 2017: 56). Also, for nine years, from 2010–2019, the Russian diplomat Yury Fedotov was the Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), another heavyweight position in the UN counter-terrorism system (UNODC n.d.).

Thus, Russia is one of the few UN member states that has been able to select candidates for key leadership positions, hold the chairmanship of counter-terrorism-related committees, and, ultimately, exert control over the structure and activities of the UN counter-terrorism architecture. Other such states are Egypt and Saudi Arabia, in particular, which understandably have their own interest in fighting terrorism on their own territories, in addition to stemming the flow of front-line terrorist fighters from other states. However, like Russia, they also have histories of violating fundamental freedoms in the fight against terrorism and using counter-terrorism measures to legitimate crackdowns on dissidents (FIDH, 2017: 57).

Another country that is definitely regarded as being like-minded to Russia on counter-terrorism questions is China. Both Russia and China hold permanent memberships in the UNSC and are also founding members of the SCO, which has coordinated its own respective policies on counter-terrorism. China has not taken a strong public initiative on counter-terrorism in the UN, rather aligning itself with Russia (FIDH, 2017: 61). However, Russia and China differ in their views on the

root causes of terrorism in their respective countries. While Russia points to external factors and foreign influence as the root causes of terrorism in the North Caucasus, China is more bound to see poverty prevention as the solution to the threat of terrorism in Xinjiang, in other words seeing internal poverty as the root cause of terrorism in the country. According to Beijing, economic development through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will also make Xinjiang immune against “foreign influences”, which Beijing has accused of exploiting the region’s economic backwardness (author’s interviews, UN, August 2018).¹¹

However, not only authoritarian states, but also democracies, may have a problematic human rights record when it comes to countering terrorism. Among the other permanent members of the UNSC, the US is one example. Since 2001, when it initiated its “War on Terror”, it has also violated fundamental freedoms and human rights in the name of countering terrorism. This includes infringement of Americans’ right to privacy in its use of invasive digital surveillance, waterboarding, arbitrary detention of detainees at Guantanamo Prison, torture committed against Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib, the closing of Muslim charitable organisations in the name of countering terrorist financing, and extra-judicial killing via drone warfare (FIDH, 2017: 69-70).

The Trump administration has, in fact, called for a return to the use of torture as an “effective mean” of interrogation and has signalled greater cooperation on counter-terrorism with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two countries with dismal human rights track records. The Trump administration has also demonstrated that it is willing to step up its cooperation with Russia on counter-terrorism, despite the above-mentioned disagreements and conflicting positions on counter-terrorism in proxy wars in Syria and Afghanistan (FIDH, 2017: 69–70).¹²

¹¹ It is not clear how this economic development theory is linked to the on-going re-education campaign in Xinjiang. According to leaked internal documents from the authorities in Xinjiang, and published by The New York Times in late 2019, at least one million people, but perhaps twice that number – mostly ethnic Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim minorities – have been incarcerated in the province’s so-called re-education camps, where detainees are held against their will and forced to perform manual labor, are forbidden from contacting relatives, and in some cases psychologically and physically tortured (Ramzy and Buckley, 2019).

¹² This was underlined when President Trump met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak in the Oval Office in the spring of 2017, and shared code-worded classified information concerning IS’s plans to use personal electronic devices such as laptops to perpetrate attacks on aircraft.

6 Russia's Key Interests in International Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

The developments in Russian foreign and domestic politics since 2012, when Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency, have been shaped by the policy of “strategic solitude” and an increased focus on Russia’s national interests. This means a more assertive anti-Western – and, particularly, anti-American – foreign policy and a more authoritarian policy at home (Persson, 2013: 83–84). In domestic politics, Russia has seen a growing emphasis on sovereignty, more specifically Russia’s sovereignty vis-à-vis international treaties (Vendil Pallin, 2018: 32). In his address to the Federal Assembly on 15 January 2020, President Putin opened for changes to the Russian Constitution that would prioritize it over international treaties and other acts (President of Russia, 2020). This report focuses on three of Russia’s key interests in the international cooperation on counter-terrorism: to obtain acceptance of its narrative on terrorism, including its methods of combating terrorism and the issue of human rights connected to the fight on terrorism; to establish internet sovereignty; and, to work against “double standards” in the cooperation on counter-terrorism.

6.1 Obtain acceptance for Russia’s narrative on counter-terrorism

One of Russia’s key interests in international cooperation on counter-terrorism is to establish its own narrative on terrorism, connected to its interpretation of such issues as human rights, democracy, rule of law, and terrorism prevention. As mentioned above, Russia has neither shown a commitment to, nor exercised best practice in, human rights compliance in combating “terrorism” domestically. The fight against terrorism and extremism in the North Caucasus has instead been used by the authorities to strengthen repressive methods and exert political and social control over all the regions (FIDH, 2017: 58–59). The Kremlin is also using the battle against terrorism as a means to circumscribe Russian democracy. Most obviously, after the Beslan tragedy in 2004, the Kremlin pushed through a set of laws that cancelled direct, popular elections of governors in the Russian regions, a measure difficult to see as being linked to counter-terrorism. Other post-Beslan legal initiatives included the January 2006 law on non-governmental organisations, a measure that vastly expanded official oversight of these groups and extended the authorities’ ability to shut down NGOs. Furthermore, in July the same year, the State Duma amended the federal law, “On Countering Extremist Activities”, making it possible for the courts to shut down parties and media

organisations for slandering government officials and threatening possible mass protests (Abdullaev and Saradzhyan, 2006: 196).

This policy of pushing through repressive legislation when describing these efforts as measures to curb terrorism has continued ever since. In June 2016, the so-called “Yarovaia package” of repressive amendments to Russian legislation was passed by the State Duma. Named after the Duma deputy, Irina Yarovaia, who formally initiated the process, these amendments seriously toughened the Russian anti-terrorism legislation, introducing, for instance, amendments demanding that telephone and internet providers store communications data and help intelligence agencies decrypt messaging services. Another change brought by the package was that neglecting to inform authorities about certain crimes can result in prison sentences, as can using internet to express approval of terrorism. There were also amendments clearly aimed at curbing protests, both for participating as well as for encouraging others to take part in protests. The Yarovaia package also extended the punishment as well as lowered the punishable age for children who take part in mass disturbances or who do not relay information about a crime (Hedenskog, Persson and Vendil Pallin, 2016: 104). Although the official motives for this package were to curb terrorism, the legislation can clearly be used against the internal political opposition.

After the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian authorities used “anti-terrorism” as pretext for curtailing democratic rights in Crimea, banning the Crimean Tatars’ representative structure, *Mejlis*, declared by Russia as an “extremist organisation”, prosecuting Crimean Tatars for membership in “Hizb ut-Tahrir”¹³, or clamping down on any resistance activity against the annexation by Crimean Tatars or Ukrainians alike (Amnesty, 2016: 1-13).

Another example is Russia’s trying to change the narrative on terrorism prevention, or Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), which is the term used within the UN system. PVE is a sensitive issue for Russia for several reasons. Most importantly, PVE is considered a Western, or rather American, concept, as an alternative paradigm to counter-terrorism. Its contribution is to balance the security-driven, top-down measures on “the war on terror” by addressing also the drivers believed to create an enabling environment for mobilisation to violence. PVE relies upon engagement with civil society, in that governments must empower and support partners at the local level who have the legitimacy, reach, and understanding necessary for effective interventions (Ucko, 2028: 253–264). This clashes with Russia’s top-down, state-driven approach to counter-terrorism, as Russia fears that PVE can violate its sovereignty and that of like-minded states. Another reason for Russia’s dislike of PVE is, rather semantically, the term itself,

¹³ Hizb-ut-Tahrir (“The Islamic Revival Party”) is an organisation that aims to eliminate non-Islamic governments and establish Islamic rule through non-violent means, proselytising of Islam to the rest of the world. The organisation is banned in Russia and several other countries, but not in Ukraine.

as it does not see the need to include the word *violent*, as extremism is violent *per se* (author's interviews, UN, August 2018).

Russia, joined by China and other countries, specifically Muslim-majority countries, has resisted the PVE's elevation of civil society and human rights to prominence, and has worked hard to limit the effect of such language in the UN. However, there have been some signs that Russia has found PVE more palatable under the Trump administration than it did during the Obama administration in the US. With Vladimir Voronkov as Under-Secretary, as the head of the UN Office on Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), overlooking all UN counter-terrorism efforts, Russia has been able to shape the meaning and profile of PVE (Ucko, 2018: 260–269). As also mentioned above, another Russian diplomat, Aleksandr Avanesov, is currently responsible for PVE in the UNDP.

6.2 Establish internet sovereignty

Another key Russian interest in connection with Moscow's counter-terrorism efforts is to establish internet sovereignty. This can be defined as a government's efforts to create boundaries on a network and control online dissemination through law enforcement.

Internet was relatively unhindered in Russia until the large anti-government demonstrations in Moscow in 2011–12. Since then, and particularly after 2014, with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and subsequent war in Donbas, internet freedom in Russia has become increasingly circumvented (Vendil Pallin, 2016: 16–17). Russia has been rather successful in building coalitions with like-minded states, such as China and other members of the SCO as well as the CSTO, on information security. Russia has a long-standing strategy of building a coalition within the UN and other international organisations to win support for Russia's stand and to push the West to approach Russia on these issues (Vendil Pallin, 2017: 7). As part of the “Yarovaia package” on “anti-terrorism”, communications providers in Russia were required to store copies of the last six months of all clients' telephone conversations, text messages, and electronic correspondence. Additionally, Russian telecoms had to store the past 30 days of clients' internet traffic history. The laws granted the intelligence agencies the right to access this logged information by court order. To facilitate the transfer of this data, the legislation designated the use of interception technology known as SORM (the System for Operatives Investigation Activities) and required all communications providers licenced by *Roskomnadzor*, the federal media regulator, to use this equipment (Kolomychenko, 2019).

Furthermore, on 1 November 2019, the federal law, “On Sovereign Internet”, came into effect. Experts estimated that the law will allow Russia to cut itself off from the rest of the World Wide Web. Thousands of people took to the streets in March 2019, after the bill had passed its first reading, in February. Putin signed the bill

into law in May 2019. There are two parts to the law. It allows for the creation of an alternative domain name system (DNS) so that, in case of an emergency, Russia will be able to disconnect itself from the rest of the internet. It also demands more filtering, by obliging Russian internet providers to buy and install deep package inspection (DPI) tools (Lindenau, 2019).

To some extent, Russia is willing to share its information technology for counter-terrorism in a wider context. In July 2016, as an example, the FSB Director, Aleksandr Bortnikov, declared that the FSB had created a database in two segments. The open segment of the database contained information on terror organisations, terror acts, and persons connected to these. At that time, 30 security services already had access to this segment. The secret segment of the database contained confidential information from Russian security services (Livejournal, 2016). Also, during a visit in Azerbaijan in November 2017, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov mentioned a database, created by the FSB, with content on foreign terrorists (Izvestiia, 2017). However, it was unclear whether it was actually the same database mentioned by Bortnikov, or another one. Nevertheless, Russia definitively has ambitions in this field and is probably seeking to have its database(s) on counter-terrorism modelled for a worldwide, UN-based counter-terrorism database.

6.3 Work against “double standards”

Finally, Russia’s third key interest in international cooperation on counter-terrorism is working against “double standards” on terrorism. This interest is also shared with China and other authoritarian members of the SCO. The call for eliminating double standards is mentioned in its National Security Strategy and the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation; the call is Russia’s attempt to have its own counter-terrorism interpretations endorsed by the international community. According to the National Security Strategy, the appearance of IS and its strengthening is the result of the policy of “double standards, which certain countries are abiding to” (Russian Security Council, 2015). In 2019, Russian foreign minister Lavrov accused Western countries of holding alleged “double standards” in relation to IS, a “terrorist organisation banned by the UN Security Council”, in order to “use them to accomplish their unilateral geopolitical tasks in Afghanistan” (Afghanistan Times, 2019). Sometimes, when Russia and China are criticized for using harsh methods to curb terrorism, or when terrorists are called “freedom fighters”, they also accuse Western countries for what they consider to be “double standards” (author’s interviews, UN, August 2018). The question of national systems for tracking terrorist data online is also an issue that has led to Russian accusations of so-called “Western double standards” (author’s interviews, UN, August 2018).

Of course, it is also easy to criticize Russia for applying “double standards” on counter-terrorism in both Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine, as already mentioned,

but also over such an issue as national self-determination. Russia has legitimate interests in the North Caucasus, such as ensuring the inviolability of the Russian Federation's constitutional order, sovereignty, independence, and national and territorial integrity – all national interests enshrined in the National Security Strategy (Russian Security Council, 2015). But the people of Chechnya, in particular, may ask why Russia went to the level of organising and supporting a “referendum” for self-determination in Crimea, but denied the same right of self-determination to the Chechens, which resulted in two devastating wars. It can be added that, in Russia, questioning Russian territorial integrity is a crime, with a maximum penalty of five years in prison (Memorial, 2013). This has been used, in particular, to quell resistance against the illegal annexation of Crimea.

7 Conclusions

The objective of this study is to provide an overview of Russia's key interests in the international counter-terrorism domain. The research questions are: What interests is Russia pushing within various international counter-terrorism structures? Through what means are these interests being promoted? To what extent are Russia's interests coordinated with other states?

During the last decade, Russia has curbed the urgent threat of terrorism in the North Caucasus by using repressive methods of law enforcement and exerting political and social control over the region. Grave human rights violations were perpetrated during the counter-terrorism operations conducted in Chechnya and the neighbouring regions of Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Although the number of victims in the armed conflict has indeed shrunk substantially in recent years, the reprieve in violence may only be temporary. Nothing points to any significant improvement in the underlying factors – such as poverty, religious and political repression, unpopular elites, and erosion of traditional values – which allowed it to occur.

Russian counter-terrorism is still characterised by the Soviet and Communist heritage, both in the organisations, methods, and attitudes. Counter-terrorism in Russia is state-centric, emphasising the interests of the state, rather than those of ordinary citizens. Very little attention – if any – is paid to human rights aspects and civilian casualties of counter-terrorism. This is also the case when it is dealing with the prevention of terrorism, both domestically and within international cooperation, such as the effort within the UN on the prevention of violent extremism (PVE). The focus, according to Russia, should be on eliminating already existing terrorism, rather than preventing new terrorism from appearing.

On international cooperation in countering terrorism, Russia has extensively used its “success” in combating domestic terrorism in order to strengthen its international approach as a role model for counter-terrorism. Russia's goal, often mentioned in Putin's speeches and anchored in Russian strategic documents, is to create a broad international coalition on counter-terrorism. Thus, counter-terrorism is used both to strengthen repressive policy at home, in Russia, and to increase Russia's influence abroad. For Russia, counter-terrorism works as a proxy for achieving international acceptance of the Russian way of governance.

As highlighted in this report, the three key interests of Russia in international cooperation on counter-terrorism are as follows: to obtain acceptance for its narrative on terrorism and human rights, to establish internet sovereignty, and to work against “double standards” in counter-terrorism. Russia is likely to get broad acceptance for its efforts in these issues from other authoritarian regimes among the members of the SCO or the CSTO. The SCO is a particularly important organisation for Russia in its efforts to establish its agenda on counter-terrorism in

international cooperation. In the UN, where Russia holds several key positions and is one of the leading countries in setting the agenda for international cooperation on counter-terrorism, Moscow can mostly count on support from other authoritarian states, particularly China and a number of Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria. China, however, maintains a rather low profile in the UN on counter-terrorism issues, preferring to support Russia's positions. Coordination between Moscow and Beijing in counter-terrorism, if needed, is probably being done in the SCO rather than in the UN.

For the Russian leadership, the events in the North Caucasus, Syria and Ukraine are interconnected. While Salafists from the North Caucasus have fought for the IS in Syria against the regime, pro-Kadyrov Chechens have supported the al-Assad government. Likewise, pro-Kadyrov Chechens have fought in Eastern Ukraine on Russia's and the pro-Russian separatist side, while anti-Russian, nationalistic, Chechens have supported Ukraine. Russia's military campaign in Syria started by that time as the level of violence had fallen both in the armed conflict in the North Caucasus and in the war in Eastern Ukraine. Furthermore, Russia has used anti-terrorism pretexts in its engagement in all three theatres.

Finally, this reports clearly shows how Russia's claims and interests in counter-terrorism differ, in general, from those of Western democracies. Russia linked its military operation in Syria with the North Caucasus, such as when its authorities facilitated the intentions of domestic terrorists to join terrorist groups in Syria. Russia also cooperates with the Taliban – who are still on Moscow's terror list – in Afghanistan and has acted as a perpetrator of terrorism in Ukraine. This all makes a deeper cooperation between Russia and the West on counter-terrorism difficult to achieve.

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Appendix

The statistical data presented here are based on open sources collected by the Caucasian Knot (*Kavkazskii Uzel*) 2013–2020. For a complete list of sources, see Chapter 8 (Sources) of the report.

Table 1. The number killed, by region, in insurgency-related violence in the North Caucasus 2010–2019.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2010– 2019 Total
Total NCFD	754	750	700	529	341	209	202	134	82	29	3730
Chechnya	127	95	82	39	52	14	27	59	26	6	515
Dagestan	378	413	405	341	208	126	140	47	36	9	2103
Ingushetia	134	70	84	36	21	16	15	11	8	4	399
Kabardino-Balkaria	79	129	107	92	49	47	14	1	6	8	532
Karachai-Cherkessia	2	22	5	5	0	4	0	5	0	0	43
North Ossetia	24	4	7	3	1	0	0	5	0	0	44
Stavropol Krai	10	17	10	13	10	2	6	6	6	2	82

Note: NCFD = North Caucasus Federal District

Table 2. The number of injured, by region, in insurgency-related violence in the North Caucasus 2010–2019.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2010– 2019 Total
Total NCFD	956	628	525	457	184	49	85	41	26	12	2963
Chechnya	123	106	92	62	65	16	16	16	9	6	511
Dagestan	307	411	290	300	85	27	64	8	13	0	2813
Ingushetia	192	38	83	58	16	5	4	13	2	6	813
Kabardino-Balkaria	82	44	49	31	17	1	1	0	0	0	225
Karachai-Cherkessia	2	12	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	18
North Ossetia	171	10	7	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	192
Stavropol Krai	79	7	2	4	1	0	0	0	2	0	95

Note: NCFD = North Caucasus Federal District

Table 3. The total number of victims, both killed and injured, by region, in insurgency-related violence in the North Caucasus 2010–2019.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2010– 2019 Total
Total NCFD	1710	1378	1225	986	525	258	287	175	108	41	6693
Chechnya	250	201	174	101	117	30	43	75	35	12	1038
Dagestan	685	824	695	641	293	153	204	55	49	9	3608
Ingushetia	326	108	167	94	37	21	19	24	10	10	816
Kabardino-Balkaria	161	173	156	123	66	48	15	1	6	8	757
Karachai-Cherkessia	4	34	7	7	0	4	0	5	0	0	61
North Ossetia	195	14	14	3	1	0	0	9	0	0	236
Stavropol Krai	89	24	12	17	11	2	6	6	8	2	177

Note: NCFD = North Caucasus Federal District

Disclaimer from the Caucasian Knot: The statistics above most likely cannot accurately reflect the number of victims. Not all data falls into news bulletins. It is not always possible to check how true the statements of law enforcement agencies are, and new data on the events of the reporting period sometimes become known even after the publication of statistics on the “Caucasian Knot”.

Since the terror attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, international cooperation on counter-terrorism has been high up on the agenda, particularly in the United Nations. Based on its experience in counter-terrorism at home, in Chechnya and the North Caucasus, as well as in Syria, Russia is increasingly using counter-terrorism as a pretext to increase its international influence. The report illustrates how Russian diplomacy works closely with law enforcement work on counter-terrorism. This cooperation strengthens the grip that Russia's authoritarian regime has on domestic developments in general and enhances Russian measures in the fight against terrorism with the purpose to bolster Russia's international influence.