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Counterterrorism Policy in the Russian Federation: Furthering the Needs of the Regime

Anastassiya Mahon and Scott Walker*

Abstract

In the wake of the September 11 attacks in 2001, countries were encouraged to enact domestic legislative changes as part of the Global War on Terror. However, it has been left to the countries themselves to define 'terrorism' and 'terrorist activities'. In this manuscript, we illustrate how liberal democracies and illiberal regimes may have very different understandings of the proper use of domestic counterterrorism (CT) policies. We argue that illiberal states, such as Russia, will likely use CT policy to enhance the ruling regime's goals in ways that liberal states would not. We focus on the critical changes in Russia's CT policy under Putin and demonstrate how Putin-era Russian CT policies have been used indirectly (i.e., in ways that are not explicitly focused on eliminating terrorist threats) to advance the Kremlin's desire to suppress domestic opposition and enhance its political standing both at home and abroad.

Keywords: Russia, terrorism, counterterrorism, illiberal regimes, Putin.

Introduction

Every country is encouraged to comply with global counterterrorism (CT) conventions as part of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed UNSCR 1373, which called on member states to adjust their national laws so that they could ratify all of the existing international conventions on terrorism. It also encouraged states to 'ensure that all terrorist acts are established as serious criminal offenses in domestic laws and regulations'. The activities it aimed to prevent included 'financing, planning, preparation of, and perpetration of terrorist acts' (United Nations, 2001). Importantly, however, UNSCR 1373 did not specify how terrorism and terrorist groups should be defined, which leaves this decision to individual countries. Notably, the global push to adopt domestic CT measures was primarily initiated by powerful Western, liberal countries, which traditionally design and enforce domestic counterterrorism policies in ways that respect their people's long-held civil rights and civil liberties. Therefore, the intent of UNSCR 1373 and related CT mandates was that countries should enact more robust measures to counteract terror networks but should do so in ways that respect civil society, popular opinion, domestic opposition groups, and free media.

What happens, however, when countries without these embedded liberal norms enact CT policies? We argue that in states where liberal norms are weak or absent, authoritarian and semi-authoritarian governments are tempted to include a number of policy goals under the rubric of counterterrorism that may extend far beyond limiting or responding to terrorism. In the absence of formal and informal checks and balances, and with few constraints on how terrorist activity is defined, illiberal regimes may be tempted to use CT policy in ways that liberal ones would find abusive; for example, directing such policies at legitimate societal groups that may represent a challenge to the regime's authority.

Liberal democratic governments, such as those in the UK or Australia, may attempt to deal with security threats by targeting the root causes of unrest and engaging with minority groups. For example, Murphy and Cherney (2011) suggest that the Australian government's 'community-based'

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approach to counterterrorism, in which it partners with Muslim communities in CT efforts, has led to an enhanced degree of cooperation and confidence in the government.

However, authoritarian governments often focus on suppression as the primary means of dealing with potential terrorist threats. Omilecheva (2009) argues that, under the pretext of counterterrorism, the Russian government ‘strengthened the powers of the ruling regime’ even though liberal governments did not have repressive policies in mind when they designed the set of global CT policies (8). In short, while global expectations are that all states will adhere closely to Western norms, regimes in illiberal states may interpret these demands to comply with CT policy as an opportunity to achieve their own secular goals.

We argue that such states may employ CT policy to reduce threats to their well-being by engaging in such actions as limiting public or media criticism, eliminating political opponents, and restricting political participation. Focusing on the case of the Russian Federation, we offer an example of how CT measures can be based on much more than just a desire to fight terrorism. The Russian government clearly employs such policies to limit challenges to its authority and thus enhance its own stability. Our analysis of the counterterrorism developments in Russia will show how the Kremlin uses CT to its advantage, to illustrate some of the ways illiberal regimes instrumentalise CT.

Liberal democracies and autocracies: Different interpretations of CT policy

Most social science research has focused on the use of CT policy in liberal Western states to achieve greater public legitimacy. In such states, there are several checks on the government’s ability to overreach its authority, including a free media, freely operating civil society groups, and an independent judiciary. Conversely, very little counterterrorism research has focused on the motivations of states that are not democratic or those with less robust levels of democracy.¹ For the most part, regimes in autocratic or illiberal states do not have strong incentives to use CT measures to increase democratic legitimacy. Instead, they are more likely to use CT policy to increase their grip on power and may be prone to using CT measures that governments would not consider in liberal states.

Therefore, it is essential to study CT efforts in illiberal states because they differ from liberal democracies in two important ways. First, their governments have greater leeway to use extra-legal measures, as they are not threatened with a loss of democratic legitimacy. Second, illiberal states are still somewhat sensitive to international opinion. As mentioned above, these regimes wish to be viewed as cooperative actors by the international community because they can reap the benefits of being seen as cooperative. Therefore, it may be possible for them to enhance their external legitimacy by cooperating across borders with international efforts and treaties. Importantly, however, such illiberal states do not, to the same degree, face the same institutional constraints on their CT activities. They are thus not likely to respect the freedom of an independent media, free speech, and civil society.

The second way illiberal states differ from liberal democracies regarding how they may use CT policy is that they often define ‘terrorism’ much more broadly. Ambrosio (2017) argues that Russia and China, for instance, have managed to blur the lines between ‘political separatism’ and ‘extremism’ on the one hand and ‘terrorism’ on the other by grouping these concepts together. They have thus chosen to use these terms ‘to bolster their regimes and to silence critics at home and abroad’ (p. 134). Ayoob (1995) argues that in order to understand security policy in areas of the world that are not populated by liberal, democratic nation-states, we should appreciate the central role that ruling elites play. In other words, ‘security considerations (their own regime’s security in the eyes of the ruling elites) dominate the domestic as well as the foreign policies’ of these states. Because such states generally face a higher degree of threat to their national sovereignty and integrity than “advanced democratic” states do, they are more focused on these threats when considering national security policies (in Aris 2009, p. 461).

1 A notable exception is Boyle, Michael J. (ed.). (2019). *Non-Western Responses to Terrorism*. Manchester University Press.

For instance, regimes in such states can invoke a CT rationale to label a certain legitimate opposition or civil society group as terrorist merely because its members are speaking out against the regime. In liberal states, effective counterterrorism policy is judged by the degree to which the government invites civil society groups to partner with it in anti-terror efforts. However, few such opportunities exist in many illiberal states for actors such as opposition political parties, trade organizations, organized interest groups, or other societal actors to cooperate with the government. This is true because there is no recognized space for these non-state actors; anything not associated with the state can be regulated and shut down.

Because of these differences, illiberal states often have significantly greater leeway to use CT measures in ways that directly enhance their hold on power by assisting them in eliminating or silencing challenges to their authority. Therefore, while an illiberal state can, as one would expect, increase its hold on power by being viewed as an effective actor in suppressing terrorism, it can also improve its political standing by eliminating criticism and opposition to the ruling group. Consequently, illiberal states may actively pursue CT policies because it is a double-win situation. On the one hand, they receive aid and praise from external actors for their CT efforts. On the other hand, they can use these newly enacted policies to suppress political opposition, thus furthering their domestic political objectives.

Boyle (2019, p. 5) states: 'Rather than simply accepting the conceptualization and counterterrorism approach favored by the United States and its allies, non-Western governments have naturally recast the threat to their own ends.' Thus, while regimes in illiberal states may appear to be dutifully responding to international pressure to implement UN-related international CT covenants in their own policies, these regimes may be using them in ways that can suppress opposition and criticism.

We turn now to the case of the Russian Federation. The rest of the paper will focus on Russia's use of CT policy and the political motivations for this strategy to illustrate how an illiberal regime uses CT to advance its goals and ensure its protection and continued hold on power.

Motivation 1: Counterterrorism as a means to increase control over domestic opposition and limit dissent

The events in Chechnya created the political space for the Kremlin to aggressively pursue it as a terrorist threat (De Haas, 2010; Eran, 2003; Pravda, 2003). After the Beslan hostage-taking, the Kremlin ceased to focus on the Chechens as the primary source of terrorism, opting to apply the terrorist label more widely. New CT laws were developed to advance the regime's political interests. In this section, we discuss key legislative changes made in the name of counterterrorism that changed Russia's political space.

In 2006, Putin began to expand the regime's control of CT policy by expanding the jurisdiction of the Federal Security Service (FSB), making it Russia's leading agency for fighting terrorism (Russia Military Power Report, 2017). The FSB Director was also appointed as National Antiterrorism Committee (NAC) Director, concentrating the power to use military force for CT purposes in the hands of one actor. Simultaneously, the Duma introduced Federal Law No 35, which made more resources widely available in the name of counterterrorism, including Russian military power and other branches of government (Federal Law N 35-FZ 2006). This new CT legislation helped Putin to consolidate power, as the FSB was widely viewed as loyal to him (Dawisha, 2014).

The Law on Foreign Agents

This set of changes in CT legislation that began in the mid-2000s granted the Kremlin more control over the public sector, especially civil society. Each new piece of legislation authorized more extensive monitoring of groups and individuals by the Kremlin, if not yet outright censorship. The first fundamental law regulating these actors in the public sector was Federal Law N 121-

FZ (later known as the Law on Foreign Agents). The government ostensibly enacted this law in order to counteract terrorism by obligating any non-commercial organization receiving foreign financing to register as a foreign agent and fully disclose all financial transactions (Federal Law N 121-FZ, 2012, article 21.6.9). Under the Law of Foreign Agents, even a small grant to a non-commercial organization from any foreign source might lead to legal proceedings against the recipient. Although its initial rationale was to prevent the financing of terrorism, the law ultimately enabled the Russian government to track the political affiliations and activities of non-commercial organizations.

Most importantly, organizations registered as foreign agents were prohibited from engaging in political activities of any kind (Federal Law No 121-FZ, 2012). In addition, the Law on Foreign Agents created obstacles for local organizations receiving financing from international sources. It gave the authorities carte blanche to conduct as many checks and raids on foreign-funded entities as they believed necessary (Kumar, 2015; Skibo, 2017).

Therefore, introducing the Law on Foreign Agents resulted in a substantial decline in non-governmental and non-profit activity. Many non-governmental organizations were unprepared or unwilling to comply with the new rules. Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch were labelled foreign agents. This put a considerable strain on their financial resources, forcing them to reduce their involvement in Russia (Skibo, 2017). Following the introduction of the Law on Foreign Agents, the total number of civil society organizations declined; in 2013, only 5,606 organizations were officially in operation, as opposed to 6,481 in 2012 (Public Organizations Registered in 2009–2019 in the Russian Federation, 2019).

The Kremlin viewed the Law on Foreign Agents as a success, as it helped to restrict the active participation of NGOs and civil society in Russia's public and political affairs. Ultimately, the Law on Foreign Agents has forced Russian civil society to adapt to survive. Many were forced to invent new strategies to help them comply with the latest CT legislation. Some organizations were required to separate their domestic and foreign activities into separate entities (OPRF, 2017). However, adapting to these new conditions was not a successful solution in the long run, as the annual number of newly approved public organizations never returned to pre-2012 levels. In 2019, only 2,857 new public organizations were registered (Public Organizations Registered in 2009–2019 in the Russian Federation, 2019).

In 2015, the Law on Foreign Agents was augmented with N 129-FZ, known as the Law on Undesirable Organizations. The stated aim of this new piece of legislation was to proscribe the activities of several Russia-based organizations that might pose a threat to national security (Federal Law N 129-FZ, 2015). This legislation change made it possible for the Kremlin to gain control over any organization, whether commercial or civil, that might pose 'a threat to the foundation of the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, the defence capability of the country or the security of the state' (Federal Law N 129-FZ, 2015, sec. 3.1). In addition, Article 1 of the law amended the Criminal Code by introducing draconian fines and the possibility of up to six years of incarceration for anyone committing a single violation (Federal Law N 129-FZ, 2015).

While the Law on Foreign Agents targeted non-commercial organizations and civil society, the Law on Undesirable Organizations granted the Kremlin more control over the commercial sector. However, the Kremlin's desire to exercise more control over civil society and public spaces has not stopped at that. In 2017, Putin extended the law on 'foreign agents' to media companies. If a company receives funds from abroad, it must register as a foreign agent and agree to subject itself to additional financial and administrative checks (Federal Law N 327-FZ, 2017; Pinchuk and Lowe, 2017; Polyakova, 2017; RFE/RL, 2017). After registration, these organizations must report their finances and activities to the Ministry of Justice every six months. The effect of this requirement was similar to that of the Law on Foreign Agents, as the introduction of N 327-FZ resulted in a lower level of resources for media companies based in Russia. As a result, the number of registrations of media companies dropped from 1,044 in the third quarter of 2016 to 571 in the third quarter of 2018 (Public Organizations Registered 2009–2019 in the Russian Federation, 2019). In 2019, another addition to the legislation, federal law N 443-FZ, stated that failure or refusal

to register as a foreign agent would result in a fine of 10,000 RUB for an individual and 500,000 RUB for a legal entity (Federal Law N 443-FZ, 2019). The combined effect of these related pieces of legislation means that every significant aspect of public space is subjected to extensive monitoring and control, and non-compliance with the new rules would cause hefty fines and even possible jail time. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2021, the Kremlin has used the Law on Foreign Agents to draw away independent media that either had to leave the country or shut down their operations.

Pokaleva (2018) argues that counterterrorism policy has permeated Russia's political space to such an extent that Russia's domestic politics are inseparable from the Kremlin's fight against terrorism. The changes came gradually, as the Kremlin slowly modified CT legislation to gain greater control over peoples' rights and freedoms. Balzacq (2008) claims that such changes help to officially normalize practices that are already part of everyday life in a given country. This new legal approach resulted in a resurgence of the 'us versus them' mentality in Russia (Shevtsova, 2006).

Thus, we can see a pattern in CT legislation: The Kremlin has increasingly restricted individual freedoms and civil liberties, allowing even less space to challenge the government than before. In the name of national security and counterterrorism, these legislative changes have placed stringent checks on the behaviour of Russian citizens, the media, and civil society organizations (Bacon, Cooper, & Renz, 2013; Barkovskaya, 2017). As a result, civil society has become much more constrained in recent years. Groups must fight daily to maintain their existence, even when they present no challenge to the establishment (Robertson, 2019). The Kremlin has used its counterterrorism-based agenda as an excuse to clamp down on civil and media space and, in the process, gain more control over the domestic political situation.

'The network'

The counterterrorism agenda is a means to prosecute people for their political beliefs, especially those who lean left or far left on the political spectrum or those challenging the establishment. As current CT legislation serves the Kremlin's goal of gaining greater control over Russian society, we can observe many cases where these policies are abused. The case of 'the Network', an organization allegedly formed to conduct terrorist attacks during the 2018 World Cup in Russia, provides one example. The case is remarkable: Seven anarchists and antifascists, who had never met before the trial, were charged with forming a terrorist organization and planning terrorist attacks to overthrow the Russian government (Chizh, 2020; Karev, 2020).

As a consequence of the new counterterrorism law, the Network case fell under the jurisdiction of a military court, and the case materials were not made public. The prosecution based their case on Article 205.4 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, "Organization of a terrorist entity and participation in it" (Pravednaya & Pavluk-Pavlyuchenko, 2020). Many observers suspect that the defendants testified under distress, as all the accused displayed signs of physical abuse from when they were arrested until their trial (Chizh, 2020; Rupression, 2018).

The sentences in the Network case led to confusion and fear in Russia's public and intellectual circles. Nearly 100,000 people signed a petition calling for an end to the prosecution of the defendants and a thorough investigation into allegations of torture (Change.org, 2019). The Network case illustrates that the Kremlin is clearly using CT policy to prosecute any group that questions the regime. Kirill Martynov, a political observer and philosopher, argued that the regime's actions closely resemble the repressive acts that Stalin committed in 1937 (Martynov, 2020). Dmitry Gudkov, an opposition politician, stated: "The Network case is another milestone on our way to the basement of 1937. We are already in that basement, no questions asked. Now it could be any of us" (Gudkov, 2020). Olga Romanova, the founder of an NGO named Russia Behind Bars (*Rus Sidyashchaya*), argues that the Network case is a warning for Kremlin's critics and citizens considering challenging the establishment. She notes that the Kremlin wants the Network case to serve as a deterrent to future political dissent and public grievances (Romanova, 2020).

New greatness

Another example of questionable CT legislation usage involved the case of New Greatness (*Novoe Velichie*), an organization allegedly formed in 2017 to overthrow the Russian government (RIA Novosti, 2020). The trial of its members raised concerns regarding how evidence can be used to substantiate terrorism allegations. In 2018, the police arrested ten people, the youngest of whom was only seventeen. Four undercover police officers testified against this supposedly extremist group (RFE/RL's Russian Service, 2019). The prosecution's evidence was based on the fact that the group had written a political manifesto and had agreed to learn how to throw Molotov cocktails in a nearby forest. In the eyes of the prosecutor's office, this constituted evidence that the group had exhibited the telltale signs of an extremist organization (RIA Novosti, 2020). Due to a vague definition of an extremist organization in the Criminal Code, Russian authorities enjoy certain flexibility in deciding what evidence to present before the court.

While the prosecution provided little evidence of illegal activity by the alleged extremist group, the undercover officers testified that they recalled conversations among the defendants about their anti-regime agenda (BBC News Russia, 2021; RIA Novosti, 2021). On this evidence, the defendants were found guilty of creating an extremist organization according to article 282.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, "Organisation of an extremist entity" (RIA Novosti, 2020). Many in the media and Russian society suspect that the state fabricated its case against the New Greatness members, as the primary form of evidence that the prosecution used to build the case (the manifesto, training sessions, meetings of the group) was testimony by undercover officers (RIA Novosti 2018; 2021).

As a result, the New Greatness case has caused massive social outrage and 'mother's marches', and the Kremlin continues to use counterterrorism to advance its political agenda (RFE/RL Russian Service, 2019). Alexey Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) has been labelled an extremist organization and disbanded (Roth, 2021). Therefore, anyone who has as much as shared an internet post supporting Navalny or his organization might be prosecuted for spreading extremist propaganda. Amnesty International's Peter Franck argues, "The only vaguely defined term of extremism is increasingly becoming a synonym for activity critical of the government" (Amnesty International, 2021). Undeniably, it sends a strong message that the regime will go to great lengths to protect itself.

However, the FBK has adapted and did not collapse. In 2022, Navalny announced that the FBK would become an international organization, with people like award winning Anne Applebaum and philosopher Francis Fukuyama on the board of directors (RFE/RL, 2022). The Foundation continues its anti-corruption investigations and anti-Putin agenda, launching a campaign to free Navalny in 2023. Alexey Navalny's prison conditions have been consistently made worse by the regime, but he stays positive and documents his life in prison. Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation remain one of the most outspoken critics of Putin's regime, despite all the efforts by the regime to silence them. Therefore, the instrumentalisation of the legislation in Russia makes it almost impossible for political opposition to remain active or survive.

To sum up, the Network and New Greatness cases and the prosecution of Navalny and the FBK illustrate how CT policy and regime protection are intertwined. The Kremlin uses the CT agenda to crack down on political opposition and possible dissent. The changes in CT legislation have provided the Kremlin with the tools to constrain potential opposition and the political involvement of civil society. They have created an opportunity for the legislation system to protect the existing regime in the name of counterterrorism. Thus, the example of domestic CT legislation in Russia illustrates how illiberal regimes may view what constitutes terrorism in a broader, more practical sense and be willing to use and enforce CT legislation to advance their political agendas.

Motivation 2: Counterterrorism as a means to enhance external and internal legitimacy

This section discusses how the Kremlin has used the CT agenda to improve Russia's external and internal legitimacy, focusing on Russia's involvement in the civil war in Syria in 2015–2018. The Kremlin's motivation to engage in the Syrian civil war was twofold: first, the Kremlin wanted to reintegrate Russia into the global community as an essential counterterrorism player, thus aiming to gain external legitimacy; second, Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict was an attempt to improve the Kremlin's internal legitimacy in the eyes of the Russian public by exercising the country's military might. In addition, Russia has held out hope that its CT campaign in Syria might lead to the lifting of sanctions placed on it by many Western countries following the annexation of Crimea, which would have improved both types of legitimacy: internationally, it would have shown that Russia can wield its power to advance its global standing via CT actions; domestically, it would have shown that Russia can influence international actors, which would have reiterated the Kremlin's rhetoric of Russia as a superpower to the domestic audience (Hamilton, Wilde, & Wimberly 2021; Pearce & Yuchshenko, 2018; Shapiro, 2017).

The Kremlin's CT campaign successfully garnered domestic support, thus bolstering the internal legitimacy of Putin's regime. And to some degree, it also succeeded in generating external legitimacy. However, it has been significantly less effective in lifting Western sanctions or easing the international condemnation of Russia's actions in Ukraine. In this section, we have argued that Russia's campaign in Syria represents an example of an illiberal regime using CT policy to achieve political goals far beyond merely combating terrorism.

External legitimacy

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has maintained focus on defending its international image and its right to bear the title of a superpower (Beyoglow, 2020; Trenin, 2017). The overarching goal of post-Cold War Russian foreign policy remains the restoration of Russia's international image as a capable player. Thus, we can argue that external legitimacy is at the forefront of the Kremlin's political goals (Giles, 2019; Nitoiu, 2017). International CT cooperation has been one of the Kremlin's primary paths toward improving its global image and reputation. For the past two decades, the Kremlin has constantly drawn the attention of both domestic and international audiences to the dangers of terrorism and Russia's proactive role in countering the threat of terrorism (Buckley, 2002; De Haas, 2010; Hamilton, Wilde & Wimberly 2021; Jackson, 2003). For example, when Putin addressed the General Assembly in 2015, he devoted a significant part of his speech to the situation in Syria, highlighting Russia's contribution to the Global War on Terror. Putin argued, "Russia has always been consistently fighting against terrorism in all its forms (read Putin's U.N. General Assembly Speech, 2015). Indeed, Russia has a long history of domestic terrorist threats originating in the North Caucasus, which the Kremlin often uses to highlight Russia's CT expertise.² However, some scholars argue that Putin viewed September 11 and the subsequent Global War on Terror as a chance to ease international condemnation of Russia's actions in Chechnya, although they have been widely criticized for the use of excessive force and questionable military tactics (Abdullaev & Saradzhyan, 2006; Herspring & Rutland 2005; Lo, 2003; Pravda, 2003; Rykhtik, 2012).

Putin's General Assembly address was a decisive political move: throughout the speech, he repeatedly addressed the importance of unity, highlighted the imminent danger of the terrorist threat, and emphasized that Russia aims to act solely within the framework of international law and the UN Charter (read Putin's U.N. General Assembly Speech 2015). The counterterrorism rhetoric followed the pattern that the Kremlin has been practicing since the Chechen conflicts: present an existential threat, call for unity, and promise to act within the law. Jones (2020) argues that the deployment of troops in Syria has shown that the Kremlin is motivated to act on the

² The term "North Caucasus" appeared during the time of the Russian Empire; thus, it reflects the political reality of that period. In this article, we use the latest political agreement on the North Caucasus composition: it consists of seven autonomous regions within the Russian Federation, namely Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessiya and Adygea (Akkieva, 2008; Ware & Kisriev 2009). Many of these regions have experienced or still are engaged in territorial disputes and internal conflicts, which fuel regional instability and tensions.

international stage again and that countering the terrorist threat was seen as playing a potentially significant role in Russia's international comeback.

The Kremlin's idea of global counterterrorism cooperation appears to be pragmatic and firmly rooted in a 'getting things done' mind-set (Alekseenkova, 2021; Leichtova, 2014). The regime promotes Russia's CT policy as inclusive and welcoming to all interested parties – suggesting it offers a politically neutral form of international cooperation that will allow the Kremlin to avoid the political judgment of potential participants. This approach stands in contrast to the policy of many liberal states, which often only offer assistance when it is tied to social, political, or economic reforms (Weiss, 2000; 2016). Therefore, Russia proposed an implicit quid pro quo: In return for not being judged for other political decisions, such as the annexation of Crimea, Russia signalled that it would not pass moral judgment on other countries. The Kremlin wants to advance the image of Russia as a neutral and willing partner whose CT cooperation would be offered dependent on other countries introducing political reforms.

Russia's practical approach to international CT cooperation has found support in the region. Turkey has offered assistance after realizing that toppling Assad's regime would not be possible while Russia supports it. And Iran has been actively engaging in diplomatic attempts to improve the situation in Syria (Beyoglow, 2020; Foy, Pitel & Cornish, 2020; Silaev & Sushentsov, 2017). Thus, the invitation to participate in the Syrian conflict as a counterterrorism partner was a chance that the Kremlin could not miss, as it represented a significant opportunity to advance the Kremlin's external legitimacy.

In addition, Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict resulted in increased influence and visibility in the Eurasian region, offering it a means to achieve goals beyond counterterrorism efforts (Petkova, 2020). In 2017, talks on the situation in Syria were held in Astana, Kazakhstan, highlighting the importance of counterterrorism cooperation and Russia's position as the security guarantor in the region (Lavrov: Rossiya i Kazakstan prizyvayut obuzdat' vsplesk terrorizma na Blizhnem Vostoke. [*Russia and Kazakhstan call for curbing the outbreak of terrorism in the Middle East*], 2017). Russian authorities called for Central Asian states to participate in the Syrian campaign, suggesting that their involvement might be an excellent opportunity to promote a regional partnership (Kalyukov, Basisini & Sidorkova, 2017).

In short, Russia's counterterrorism campaign in Syria successfully enhanced Russia's standing in the Middle East and ultimately achieved the goal of improved external legitimacy that motivated the Kremlin to engage in the conflict. As a result, Russia has started rekindling diplomatic relationships with the countries in the region, gained political and economic influence, and re-established itself as an active and capable player in the region (Hamilton, Wilde & Wimberly, 2021).

Internal legitimacy

Hamilton et al. (2021) claim that the Kremlin used the CT campaign in Syria to increase the internal legitimacy of the regime through an exhibition of Russia's military capabilities and an extensive campaign to gain the domestic audience's support. As a result, the Kremlin has enjoyed increased public support since the beginning of the Syrian campaign. The domestic public reacted to the counterterrorism campaign in Syria favourably. In a 2015 poll by Levada Center, 30% of respondents said that the involvement in Syria aimed to protect Russia's interest in the Middle East, while 28% replied that Russian engagement in Syria is instrumental in strengthening Russia's position in the world (Levada Center, 2015). In addition, 11% fully supported the Kremlin's actions in Syria, 28% mostly supported them, and only 3% answered that they do not support Russia's actions in Syria (Levada Center, 2015). In 2016, 52% of Russians supported airstrikes in Syria to achieve the Kremlin's goal of helping Assad fight the Islamic State (Smeltz, Goncharov & Wojtowicz 2016). Therefore, the Russian public supported Putin's decision to deploy Russian forces in the Syrian conflict. In fact, according to a 2017 Levada poll, Russians named the conflict in Syria/fight with IS as the year's most important event (Levada Center, 2017a).

Showcasing Russia's military capacity is essential to the Kremlin's ongoing quest for internal legitimacy. It is a way to demonstrate that Russian forces are skilled at conducting CT missions and, by extension, that the Kremlin is ready to reclaim its superpower status. In a 2016 Levada Center poll, 22% of respondents said they believed a country must possess significant military might and nuclear weapons to be respected (Levada Center, 2016). This was the second most popular answer, surpassed only by the need for a country to support the welfare of its citizens. An overwhelming 76% of the respondents believed it was essential that Russia retain its superpower status (Levada Center, 2016). Therefore, Russian society supported Putin in his quest to show the world that Russia is a militarily powerful international actor, connecting Russia's engagement in Syria to its improving international image.

In 2019, the Kremlin capitalized on the Syrian counterterrorism campaign domestically, using Russia's military display in Syria to increase the Russians' spirit and sense of belonging. Building on patriotism and national pride, the Kremlin launched a moving exhibition of Syrian war artefacts called the Syrian Breakthrough, which consisted of various weaponry, military equipment, and vehicles seized by the Russian Army in Syria.³ The exhibition was not limited to Russian and Syrian weaponry; it also contained foreign ammunition, rations, and even a Jeep Grand Cherokee that had belonged to a suicide bomber (TASS, 2019).

More than one million people visited the Syrian Breakthrough train, and 23,000 recruits signed up for military service (Bolee milliona rossijan posetilo peredvizhnuju vystavku «Sirijskij Perelom» [*More than a million Russians went to the moving exhibition "Syrian Breakthrough"*], 2019; TASS, 2019). The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation organized the exhibition following Putin's proposal, which provided the domestic audience with increased exposure to Russia's military might. Syrian Breakthrough also contributed to glorifying Russia's assertive foreign policy to domestic audiences, reassuring them that the Kremlin is working hard to eliminate terrorism domestically and abroad (Nitoiu, 2017). The campaign was successful, and in 2021, another exhibition train was sent across Russia: a new agitation campaign called We Are the Army of the Country! We Are the Army of the People!⁴ (*My – armija strany! My – armija naroda!*) aiming to showcase Russia's military might and glorify its military past and present. As before, it is accompanied by a mobile army enlistment unit and officials from the Department of Defence (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2021). Therefore, the CT campaign in Syria has been used as a springboard to achieve goals far beyond cooperating with the Syrian government on counterterrorism. The Syrian campaign was paramount in delivering the message to domestic audiences that Russia is a capable power, improving the Kremlin's legitimacy.

Overall, the Russian campaign in Syria has been presented by the government as a success to domestic audiences. Improving the international image of Russia and the consistently high support of Russia's involvement in Syria in the eyes of domestic audiences ensured that the Kremlin was motivated to continue using counterterrorism policies to enhance its internal and external legitimacy. Moreover, the Syrian campaign would build on the patriotism and pride cultivated by the Kremlin to reassure the Russian public that the current assertive foreign policy course aiming to return Russia to its status as a great power is worth pursuing (Nitoiu, 2017; Pinkham, 2017). To date, the Kremlin is using the Syrian campaign to build both external and internal legitimacy in the name of counterterrorist actions.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that Russia's CT policy over the last twenty years has been based not only on a desire to combat terrorism but also to promote the Kremlin's interests in stabilizing its hold on power. We have discussed how Putin used the CT agenda to promote the Kremlin's control over domestic politics. First, we focused on how the Russian government has used CT legislation

³ An online version of the exhibition is available at <https://syriantrain.mil.ru/>.

⁴ A website dedicated to Russia's mission in Syrian, including the information on the exhibition, is available at <http://syria.mil.ru> in five languages: Russian, English, French, Spanish, and Arabic.

to suppress domestic political opposition and dissent to reduce challenges to its authority. Second, we examined how the Kremlin has used its CT efforts in Syria to improve its domestic and international standing and legitimacy.

Omelicheva (2009) states, “The forceful means of control is the essence of authoritarian rule. This explains the primacy of coercive, retaliatory, short-term counterterrorism responses that have been adopted by the Russian regime.” (p. 9). Our research confirms that, indeed, actions by the Russian government up to the current time represent more than a short-term CT response; they have been part of a systemic institutional change in the country that has led to an overhaul of Russia’s domestic politics.

While we have focused on the case of Russia, social scientists should extend their studies of the ways in which governments may use CT policy to their own political advantage to other illiberal states or those without long traditions of respect for civil liberties, freedom of the press, and other hallmarks of liberalism. In this way, it will be possible to map the links between domestic factors such as regime type and the type of CT strategies employed in order to gain a clearer understanding of which states are likely to employ which policies. The reason is simple. Therefore, the global community needs to develop CT policies focused squarely on combating terrorism. While it cannot be denied that Russia, for example, has indeed used such policies to combat global terrorist threats at times, it must be recognized that illiberal governments may use them to enhance their own interests at the expense of civil society and other legitimate societal actors. We can see the effect of these policies in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, as they have clearly helped to limit domestic resistance to this action.

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